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# Kin-First Approaches in Child Welfare

Government agencies can never replace the critical role of extended family and community in a child's life. Increasingly, State and local child welfare agencies are recognizing this by using comprehensive approaches that prioritize family ties and support extended families in working together in the best interests of their children. This orientation has been described as creating a "kin-first culture," where values, policy, and practice align to ensure children remain connected to family whenever possible (Miller, 2017).

This issue brief describes how child welfare agencies can move toward a holistic kin-first approach that honors the central importance of family in children's lives. It provides an overview of the foundational principles and benefits of a kin-first approach and describes system changes that support this approach. The brief includes examples of how specific jurisdictions have moved in this direction and resources for further information.

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To read more about kinship care, including information about informal kinship care that does not involve a child welfare agency, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's publication [Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System](#).

## WHAT IS A KIN-FIRST APPROACH?

A kin-first approach starts with a simple but powerful premise: children do best when they are with their families. In this context, "kin" includes a child's immediate and extended family members, as well as close family friends (sometimes referred to as "fictive kin"). Kin-first child welfare agencies communicate their commitment to respect and prioritize families in various ways. Some of the stated principles and values that reflect an agency's kin-first orientation include:

- Children need their families for safety and healing.
- Families are the experts in what they need and should drive decision-making.
- Families are resilient and capable of supporting each other to overcome challenges.
- Kin caregivers deserve the same support and recognition as birth families, adoptive families, and nonkin foster families.

In recent years, Federal legislation has emphasized the importance of preventing entry into foster care by keeping children safely at home whenever possible and identifying, engaging, and supporting the kin of children in or at risk of entering the child welfare system. In 2008, the [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act](#) significantly expanded Federal support for kinship care. The law included landmark provisions allowing States to offer financial assistance for relative guardianship—previously reserved for postadoption support. It also required child welfare agencies to make diligent efforts to notify relatives when a child enters foster care.

The 2020 [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (FFPSA) further highlighted the vital importance of family and kin caregivers to child well-being, in part by shifting funding upstream to support efforts to keep children with their families. FFPSA allows Federal title IV-E reimbursement for qualified services to parents and relative caregivers, including mental health, parenting, substance use treatment, and kinship navigator programs, to support children in kinship care or prevent placement in foster care. There are currently a variety of qualified [kinship navigator program models](#) with a promising rating from the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). All States previously received set-aside title IV-B, subpart 2 funding to develop, enhance, or evaluate kinship navigator programs while title IV-E eligible models were being identified (Children's Bureau, 2021).

FFPSA also requires agencies to engage family members in planning for children's placement and treatment, encourages licensing of kin caregivers, and promotes permanency through relative guardianship. In 2023, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau adopted a [rule permitting States to develop separate, more flexible licensing standards](#) for kinship foster family homes. The Children's Bureau website offers a [map tracking which States and Tribes have approved standards](#). This flexibility addresses barriers—such as housing or income standards—that can often exclude relatives.

In 2025, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) announced the launch of [A Home for Every Child](#), a national initiative in support of President Trump's Executive order [Fostering the Future for American Children and Families](#). This initiative aims to increase the availability of safe homes for children needing foster care through diligent recruitment and prioritization and support of kin caregivers.

Kin-first child welfare agencies build on this [Federal foundation](#), translating policy into practices that transform the experience of families at all points along the continuum of child protection system involvement, including the following:

- Early identification and notification of kin, beginning at a child's first contact with the system
- Family-driven decision-making at placement and throughout the life of the case
- Embracing and cultivating natural supports to help families stay safely together
- Ensuring a child's first placement is with kin when entry into foster care is necessary
- [Keeping siblings together](#) whenever possible and supporting healthy sibling relationships
- Conducting ongoing family search and engagement for children in foster care who are not placed with relatives
- Removing barriers to kin licensure and providing kin caregivers with support and resources comparable to those offered to unrelated foster families
- Supporting an array of permanency options for kin, including relational permanency

A commitment to a kin-first approach helps child welfare agencies strengthen their focus on prevention, commit to family driven decision-making, prioritize placement of children who enter foster care with kin, and pursue permanency with kin through reunification, guardianship, or adoption.

### **Kin-First Approaches in Tribal Child Welfare**

Child welfare practice involving American Indian/Alaska Native children has long taken a kin-first approach. The [Indian Child Welfare Act](#) of 1978 requires child welfare agencies to preserve children's right to remain connected to their extended families, communities, and culture. It encompasses a higher standard for efforts to preserve and reunify families (*active* vs. *reasonable* efforts), a culturally determined definition of what constitutes "family," preferences for placement with family and Tribal members, and guidelines for authentic engagement with the child's Tribal community in decision-making.

## WHY A KIN-FIRST APPROACH?

Considerable evidence demonstrates that engagement of kin is in the best interests of children. A child protection investigation is a [traumatic experience](#). Children may endure repeated interviewing about traumatic events, experience stress from the uncertain outcome, and worry about parents' and siblings' well-being. Separation from their family, even for a brief time, is an adverse childhood experience that is [particularly hard on the youngest children](#).

Engaging kin offers the benefit of familiar faces and environments that can help reduce separation anxiety and provide comfort during a stressful time. Research has repeatedly confirmed the following benefits of kinship care:

- **Behavioral health.** Research reviews have found that the behavioral and mental health of children in kinship care is better than that of children placed in nonkin foster homes (Campbell Collaboration, 2014; Washington et al., 2018). Improvements in behavioral and mental health would suggest better [physical health outcomes](#) may also be likely, but more research is needed in this area.
- **Placement stability.** Studies have repeatedly shown that children in kinship care experience fewer placement disruptions (Bell & Romano, 2017; Osborne et al., 2021; Winokur et al., 2018). The negative impacts of placement instability for children in out-of-home care are well documented (Asif et al., 2024), and placement stability is a key outcome measured by the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews of State child welfare systems.
- **Legal permanency.** Children in kinship care are more likely to achieve legal permanency through guardianship and less likely to reenter foster care after reunification than those in nonkin placements (Bell & Romano, 2017).
- **Preserved connections.** Relationships with kin can help children stay closer to their families, communities, and cultures and support [relational permanency](#). A meta-analysis showed children in kinship care [feel more connected to family](#) than those in nonkin foster care. Connection to family was found to be associated with better outcomes.
- **Academic performance.** [A large study of more than 500,000 youth](#) found that children in kinship care had better academic outcomes than children in nonrelative foster care. The greatest difference was found in math scores. The academic performance of children in formal kinship care was comparable to that of children living with their birth or adoptive parents (Washington et al., 2021).
- **Cost implications.** A few studies have looked at the relative costs of kinship care. One showed that [30 Days to Family](#) (an intensive family-finding and kinship support intervention) realized significant cost savings. Other known benefits of kinship care, including placement stability and improved behavioral health, also reduce administrative and treatment costs.

## BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO A KIN-FIRST APPROACH

Despite these proven advantages, many child welfare systems face challenges in implementing and sustaining effective kin-first policies and practices, as well as significant barriers to finding, approving, and supporting kin families. The rate of children in foster care who are living with kin is increasing nationally, but it remains under 40 percent (Children's Bureau, 2025).

The experience of kin caregivers is markedly different from that of unrelated foster families. Unlike foster families, who often receive months of training before a child is placed in their home, most kin caregivers have little to no warning before relative children arrive. In addition to new or altered relationships with the children, many are navigating complex family dynamics with the children's parents. Yet in many systems, licensing, orientation, training, and support policies have been designed with unrelated foster families at the forefront and kin families as an afterthought.

Research shows that children in kinship care fare better when their caregivers are connected to a network of services and supports. However, new kin caregivers often feel uninformed about the legal options, child welfare supports, and other services available to them or how to apply for help (Fathallah et al., 2024). Help-seeking may be further complicated by complex and siloed social services, mistrust of public systems, and limited access to or adeptness with technology.

Even within the child welfare system, kin caregivers often receive fewer agency supports and resources than nonrelative foster parents. This is true even though kin caregivers experience greater physical, mental health, and financial challenges than the general population (Generations United, 2023).

Common needs of kin families include:

- **Assistance with basic needs.** This can include housing, food, and child care. Housing is a particularly acute concern, as kin caregivers are often older adults whose homes are too small or unsuitable for children.
- **Support with legal issues.** Kin caregivers do not automatically have the legal rights to seek medical care, school enrollment, or [special education services](#) for their children. The cost of securing that legal relationship is out of reach for many families.
- **Mental health services.** Both children and their caregivers can benefit from trauma-informed emotional and behavioral health services. Kin caregivers may be socially isolated from peers who are not raising children. Their own physical and mental health may take a back seat to the children's immediate needs.
- **Respite.** Kin caregivers may find it difficult to rely on other family members or close friends to step in and give them a much-needed break, especially if children have experienced trauma or have complex needs.

In 2024, Think of Us released a [report centering the voices of people with lived experience](#) that was informed by a National Convening on Kinship Care, cohosted with the Children's Bureau. Participants included policymakers, advocates, practitioners, and leaders of child welfare agencies

that serve about one-fifth of youth involved in child welfare in the United States. The report sought to understand the strengths and challenges of kinship care, review and compile kin-first practices, and identify opportunities to improve kinship care.

According to the report, agency barriers to effective kin support exist in policies and practices as well as in mental models (perceptions, beliefs, and ideas) (Fathallah et al., 2024). In other words, becoming a kin-first agency requires attention to both policies and attitudes. These barriers affect all aspects of kin involvement in child welfare, including search and engagement; placement, approval, and licensing; caregiver support; and permanency planning.

## SYSTEMS CHANGES THAT SUPPORT A KIN-FIRST APPROACH

The barriers to kinship care are multifaceted. As such, they are most effectively addressed through a comprehensive, agencywide approach that prioritizes family. Creating a kin-first agency requires strong leadership, partnerships, and policy review.

### MAKE KIN-FIRST A LEADERSHIP PRIORITY

Implementing and maintaining a kin-first culture starts with leadership. This may require training, education, and orientation of appointed and executive leadership regarding the value of kin as a first step. Once adopted as a leadership priority, kin-first approaches can be implemented in all areas of policy, programs, and operations, including the following:

- **Advisory.** A task force that meaningfully includes family members can support leadership in monitoring the implementation of kin-first mission, goals, and policies. It can also keep leadership informed of promising kin-first practices and ensure accountability.
- **Communication.** Leaders promoting a kin-first approach communicate the value of kin at every opportunity. A statement to this effect can be included in the agency's core values or practice model and reiterated frequently in both internal and external communications. Ideally, caregivers would be engaged in drafting and reviewing these statements.
- **Comprehensiveness.** To the extent permitted by State law, kin should be explicitly and broadly defined to include both relatives and fictive kin. Think of Us suggests "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" (Fathallah et al., 2024, p. 14).
- **Policy and practice.** The more a kin-first approach can be embedded in the fabric of how the organization does business, the more likely it will be to survive inevitable leadership changes. All policies and procedures should be reviewed with input from families and, if necessary, revised to ensure alignment with this priority.
- **Data.** Support for kinship care should be evident in data collected and outcomes measured and tracked, both in aggregate and by office or region. Services and outcomes for children diverted from the child welfare system to live with relatives should also be tracked.

- **Staffing.** Kin-first agencies often adjust staffing, including creating specialized positions or units, to better support the needs of kin and the caseworkers who serve them. Hiring people with lived experience as kin caregivers or being raised by kin is a concrete way to demonstrate how much the agency values their perspective. Staff at all levels should be reflective of the backgrounds of the kin families being served.
- **Training.** All staff, regardless of their role, may benefit from training, resources, and support to better understand the unique needs of kin caregivers. Such training should seek to help staff empathize and work effectively with caregivers of different backgrounds and counter antifamily beliefs or attitudes. Kinship care services, outcomes, and client satisfaction should be considered in performance evaluations and incentives.



### Jurisdictional Profile: Connecticut

From the beginning of her 8-year term, Commissioner Joette Katz of the Connecticut State Department of Children and Families made placement of children with relatives an agencywide priority. An early all-staff [memo](#) formalized this intention, establishing “the expectation that all children in our care be placed with relatives and the *exception* that they go into non-relative care” (Katz, 2011, p. 1).

The commissioner set a goal of 40 percent of overall placements with kin, and the department provided monthly data to regional directors to track performance on this metric (Grandfamilies.org, 2022). This priority was operationalized by doing the following:

- Creating specialized staff positions for kinship licensure and training, with emergency staff available for timely walk-through assessments of relative homes
- Employing a global security company to provide background checks within hours for expedited relative placements
- Creating a streamlined waiver process that helps ensure assessments of relative caregivers focus more on their current abilities and less on their history, their income, or the structure and layout of their homes
- Maintaining a comprehensive database of requests to license relatives, approval rates, and barriers to pending requests

### ENGAGE AND CULTIVATE ALLIES

No child welfare system can provide every form of support a family may need. Legal partners such as judges, attorneys, and court-appointed special advocates (CASAs) play an important role in supporting an agency's commitment to a kin-first approach. Agency leadership can encourage judges to ask questions about diligent family finding efforts before approving nonkin placements. Inviting attorneys and CASAs to join child welfare staff in kin-focused trainings can build common understanding and enhance relationships that make courageous conversations easier when needed.

Connections with community partners are essential to a system's ability to understand families' needs, address these needs effectively where possible, and refer families to other services beyond the scope of child welfare. Partners may include nonprofit community-based organizations as well as local faith communities and businesses with family-supportive policies. Kinship navigator programs help kin caregivers find and access community resources.

Community members with lived experience of child protective services and kinship care are arguably a child welfare agency's most important partners in a kin-first approach. People who have themselves navigated kinship care can share what helped them most and point out potential pitfalls. They can also help vet and connect families to resources that truly embody the agency's kin-focused values. Consultation with kin caregivers and organizations that represent their interests is required for States receiving the fiscal year 2025 title IV-B, subpart 2 [kinship navigator grants](#) (Children's Bureau, 2025).



### **Jurisdictional Profile: Washington**

Washington has built a strong infrastructure to support kin caregivers over many years, including a statewide Kinship Care Oversight Committee that coordinates resources and services across departments (Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network, 2024). Within the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, a [Kinship Caregiver Engagement Unit](#) provides concierge-level licensing support for relative caregivers. In 2020, about 47 percent of all children under 18 in the State's foster care system were placed with kin, a rate that is significantly higher than the national average (Ybarra et al., 2022).

[Research from Washington](#) published in 2022 found that children and youth in out-of-home care experienced greater well-being and less hopelessness when placed with kin. Youth living with kin felt less unsafe and reported experiencing less harassment than their peers in nonrelative foster care. They also showed slight improvements in externalizing behavior during the first 6 months in kinship care, while those placed in foster care showed significantly worse externalizing behavior problems during that time (Ybarra et al., 2022).

To establish a more comprehensive kin-first culture, the department needed the support of a broad cohort of partners. Working with consulting partner Bloom Works, the department engaged in a 6-month codesign process. In interviews and focus groups with 400 youth, formal and informal kin caregivers, staff, child-placing agencies, representatives from 10 Tribal Nations, and other community partners, they explored what a kin-first culture looks like for Washington and how to achieve it (Bloom Works, 2023). From the findings, the department and its partners created a [Kinship Playbook](#) with concrete recommendations for everything from shifting mindsets to improving internal and external communications to improving case management and support services for youth and caregivers.

## IMPLEMENT KIN-FIRST POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Agency and organization leaders can employ a kin-first approach at every point along the child welfare continuum.

### Search, Notification, and Engagement

The foundation of a kin-first approach is an active strategy to find, notify, and engage relatives at first contact and throughout a case, including before any placement change or approval of a nonkin permanency plan. Effective search and engagement policies include the following:

- **Engage parents** and children, if age appropriate, as they may be best positioned to identify supportive kin. They may need to be asked multiple times; parents may become more willing to open up as trust is built or when placement with a nonrelative foster parent is imminent. Provide caseworkers with collaborative [tools like ecomaps and genograms](#) to help prompt thinking and conversation.
- **Vigorously explore paternal family networks.** Children deserve every opportunity to connect and build relationships with both sides of their family.
- **Create dedicated staff positions, teams, or units** to support search and outreach to relatives. Train all staff in effective engagement and collaboration with families.
- **Use technology and social media** to speed up and enhance family searches. Several specialized fee-based search tools exist, including [Binti](#), [Family Connections/People Search](#), and [SenecaSearch](#).
- **Engage kin even when they are not placement options.** Not all kin will be able to have children placed in their homes. But they can provide important natural supports to help children maintain connections to family and help parents complete their treatment plans so the family can successfully reunify.

### Example: Upfront Family Finding (Los Angeles County)

Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) launched the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program in 2016 to ensure relative search and engagement occur at the very beginning of a case rather than after children have lingered in foster care. The program charges dedicated workers with locating and engaging family members immediately upon a child's entry into care.

A 2021 [evaluation found UFF increased the likelihood of children being placed with relatives](#), particularly in the program's initial pilot sites. An evaluation of those initial sites found that children in UFF were 16 percentage points more likely to be placed with relatives compared to children not served by the program (Welti et al., 2018). Across 10 regional offices, the program consistently expanded the pool of relatives identified as potential caregivers or supports (Welti et al., 2021).

Results for placement stability and reunification were mixed, but the evaluation highlighted that children served by UFF had a larger network of kin identified earlier, giving caseworkers and courts more options for safe placements and family-based support. Relatives identified early often became

critical members of decision-making teams, broadening the circle of support around children and parents and helping to ensure that decisions about children's safety are grounded in family knowledge and connection.

The findings reinforce that family finding is not just a strategy for "hard-to-place" cases or older youth. It is most impactful when initiated at the very start of child welfare involvement.

### **Example: Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition (Missouri) and Kinnect to Family (Ohio)**

The Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, a child welfare nonprofit in the St. Louis area, developed two innovative family engagement programs. Both **Extreme Recruitment** and **30 Days to Family** employ intensive recruitment strategies and preparation to develop permanency options for children: one for hard-to-place children (including older youth, sibling groups, or children with unique physical or mental needs) and the other upon children's entry into care. The intervention identifies approximately 80 potential relative or kin placements for each child, provides resources and support to families, and monitors placements for safety and suitability.

Studies in two jurisdictions found that children served by 30 Days to Family were more likely than other eligible children to be placed with kin, spend fewer days in foster care, and experience better permanency outcomes. The greatest reductions of time in care were found for older children and those with disabilities. The use of private investigators has been found to boost contact rate with relatives from 23 percent to 80 percent (Scheetz & Flavin, 2015).

In Ohio, 30 Days to Family proved so successful that family finding now continues throughout the life of a child welfare case. Ohio was approved to implement the 30 Days to Family model as a [Title IV-E Kinship Navigator program](#). Outcomes of the new model, called Kinnect to Family, include finding safe kin to prevent children from entering foster care altogether, serving families who were unable to receive intense family search and engagement services before their initial court hearing, and helping to finalize adoptions for children in permanent custody arrangements. [Program materials](#) note, "It is never too early or too late for diligent searching and relentless engagement of kin" (Kinnect to Family, n.d., p. 1).

### **Decision-Making**

Kin-first agencies empower families to come together and plan for the safety of their children. Agencies can support family decision-making through the following:

- **Clear communication about options.** This includes full disclosure of the implications of various placement, licensing, and permanency alternatives so families can decide what is best for their unique situation.
- **Processes that promote broad engagement, respect, and collaboration.** This includes family group decision-making meetings that take place early and often throughout the life of the case. These meetings can allow families to strategize about which additional kin to notify and engage, how to support parents in keeping their children safe at home, how to help parents achieve their safety plan goals, and how they will support a permanency plan—not just where the children will go if remaining at home is not an option.

### **Example: Epic 'Ohana (Hawaii)**

The nonprofit Epic 'Ohana uses a strategy called ['Ohana Conferencing](#) to bring together extended family, child welfare and other service providers, and other members of the child and family's support system to make decisions about how best to protect child safety while strengthening the family. Conferences build on the foundational belief that when children can stay connected to family in a healthy way, everyone benefits. In an 'Ohana conference, everyone has an opportunity to be listened to with respect. The group works collaboratively to come up with solutions tailored to the family's strengths, needs, and resources.

### **Placement**

Evidence supports placement with kin as the preferred option when children cannot safely remain at home. Kin-first agencies declare first placement with kin as the norm and nonkin placement the exception as a matter of policy. Strategies include the following:

- **Creating kinship firewalls** that require special approval from a supervisor, manager, or director for any nonkin placements. Firewall policies help ensure protocols for family search and engagement are followed and that all kin options are exhausted.
- **Engaging the courts' support** by encouraging judges to ask questions about possible family connections when they encounter children in nonkin placements.
- **Employing specialized staff teams or case aides** to help caseworkers complete time-intensive steps such as background checks and home safety assessments. Kin placements require intensive work to assess, orient, and approve caregivers who, unlike foster parents, have not had months or years to prepare for this decision.
- [Establishing border agreements with neighboring States](#) to ease placement with out-of-State relatives.

### **Example: New York**

New York has implemented several policies to ensure kin are the first and preferred placement option in all local departments of social services (LDSSs). Each New York LDSS is required to employ at least one "Kin Champion" who advocates for kin-first policies and practices, serves as a kinship resource for colleagues, searches for and assesses potential kin caregivers, fosters family decision-making, and supports caregivers. In addition, all LDSSs are required to establish and document a kinship firewall policy that ensures all kinship options are exhausted before any nonkin placement is approved (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2023). The State's publicly accessible [Relative Trend Report](#) promotes accountability by sharing annual kinship placement data statewide and by county.

### **Approval and Licensing**

Licensing standards ensure that thorough assessment and preparation of foster parents occur before children are placed. These standards are not always realistic for kinship foster parents and prevent timely placement of children in foster care with kin. Historically, this has left many kin

unable to care for their relative children or in unlicensed arrangements without adequate support. Changes in Federal law now make it easier for States to reduce barriers not related to safety for kin. Strategies to realize these improvements include the following:

- **Creating new licensing standards** that align with the [Kin-Specific Foster Home Approval model standards](#) created and endorsed by a collective of national organizations (in some States, this may require legislative partnership)
- **Developing a list of approval or licensure requirements not related to safety** (e.g., age limitations or space requirements) that may be waived and establishing a clear, simple process for requesting approvals
- **Helping unlicensed kin caregivers know they have the option to become licensed** and understand the benefits of doing so
- **Providing dedicated funding and staff (or nonprofit partner) support** to remove barriers and help kin meet approval or licensure requirements (e.g., fingerprinting, home repairs, beds)

#### **Example: Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) and A Second Chance**

Allegheny County partnered with a community-based organization, A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI), to increase its kinship placement and licensing (Casey Family Programs, 2020). ASCI helped the county reimagine its approach with an emphasis on how to license families *in*, rather than ruling them out. The process begins with a strength-based assessment. Caseworkers actively partner with families to address home limitations, including providing resources such as smoke detectors and extra beds when needed.

To help families meet training requirements, ASCI often delivers its customized curriculum during evening and weekend hours. When possible, ASCI will license both a primary and secondary kin family to ensure a child will never need to enter nonrelative foster care, even in a caregiver emergency. Once a family is approved, ASCI provides a range of ongoing supports, including transportation, in-home clinical care, services for children and their siblings, and respite. Supported by this unique partnership, Allegheny County achieved a 65 percent kin placement rate (Casey Family Programs, 2020).

#### **Caregiver Support**

Financial support is critical for many kin caregivers. Federal policy now requires title IV-E agencies to provide kin caregivers who meet licensing or approval standards with support that is equal to foster care maintenance payments for unrelated foster homes. Other supports kin-first agencies can provide to caregivers include the following:

- **Kinship navigator programs.** These programs can help caregivers both within and outside the child welfare system find and access the resources they need, from public benefits to community groups and recreational opportunities that help their families thrive. Visit the [Kinship Navigator Program page](#) on the Children's Bureau website to learn more.
- **Simple, intuitive online tools.** Such tools, like [iFoster's free, 24/7 resource portal](#), can connect busy caregivers with money-saving resources.

- **Flexible training opportunities** that allow caregivers to access the information they need when they are ready to receive it. The [National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#) includes a full section of free, interactive courses on a variety of topics, including family dynamics, accessing services and support, and building parental resilience.
- **Services to address the mental and behavioral health needs of the entire family.** This includes education for caregivers about the impact of trauma on children's behavior, wraparound support for children with high support needs, and resources for caregivers experiencing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue.
- **Encouragement to connect with and lean on extended family and natural supports in their communities.** These informal supports are key to family self-sufficiency and will remain in families' lives long after the agency has closed its case.

### Example: KIN-TECH (Florida)

The Children's Home Network's KIN-TECH model employs peer navigators to help new kin caregivers identify and access the support they need. KIN-TECH hosts interdisciplinary team meetings with community partners to problem-solve individual family issues across multiple systems (including child welfare, education, housing, legal, and mental health) and collaborate on reducing systemic barriers to services. Caregivers in the program have access to numerous support groups, family activities, and advocacy opportunities.

Peer navigators receive extensive training, laptops they can bring to clients' homes, and exclusive access to direct technical support to help caregivers—particularly those who struggle with technology access or use—complete online applications for benefits. This service helped bring the number of eligible children in kinship care receiving the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only benefit up from 11 percent to more than 50 percent (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). The KIN-TECH model is recognized as a supported program by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#).

### Permanency

Kin-first agencies prioritize permanency options with relatives when children are unable to return home. This can be supported by the following:

- **Ensuring a full range of permanency options** is available to kin. This includes options such as guardianship and Tribal customary adoption for families that do not want to terminate parental rights as required by adoption.
- **Clearly explaining the immediate and long-term implications** of each permanency option for the child, birth parents, and kin caregiver so families can choose the option that works best for their child and circumstances. Resources like [Virginia's brochure exploring options for relatives and close family friends](#) or [New York's kinship options chart](#) address both the legal and financial benefits and consequences of each choice.

- **Offering postpermanency services and supports**, including [subsidies](#) for both adoption and [guardianship](#) where appropriate. Services should continue to be available to help youth and families cope with trauma symptoms that may appear at a later developmental stage.



### Jurisdictional Profile: Virginia

Through sustained focus, intentional investment, and collaboration among State, regional, and local agencies, Virginia’s kin-first approach is yielding positive outcomes for families. The State’s general assembly first asked the Virginia Department of Social Services to review its policies regarding kinship arrangements in 2014. An advisory group was created at that time. In 2023, the State established a goal of meeting the national average of 35 percent of all foster care placements with kin by the end of 2025 (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2025).

Virginia employed strategies to provide more resources to kin caregivers, including establishing a child-only TANF supplement of \$200 per child for relatives caring for a child at risk of entering foster care. The State also clarified guidance and adopted more flexible standards for approving relatives and fictive kin as foster parents. The department strengthened notification to kin, including [materials detailing all options](#) and the financial and legal considerations of each.

One key element of Virginia’s overall strategy, Kin First Now, is a collaboration among the State, regional, and local offices to invest and prioritize staff time in engaging kin. Kin First Now focuses on increasing family engagement, particularly around removal and placement decisions. It consists of three core practice elements:

- **Out-of-home staffing** brings local staff together when children are at risk of entering foster care to discuss the family’s needs, strengths, and challenges and to create a plan for engaging natural supports. This teaming approach promotes urgent identification of family members who can participate in decision-making, while reducing the burden on individual caseworkers.
- **Family partnership meetings** provide a safe space for families to come together, learn about placement and permanency options, and decide which path will work best for them.
- **The permanency assessment tool** is used to facilitate open dialogue to assess prospective relative caregivers.

From October 2023 to November 2024, 19 local agencies participated in visits with the State and Virginia regional office partners to develop a Kin First Now action plan. From the State’s fiscal year 2023 to the first half of 2025, every region in the State increased the percentage of children who were placed with kin first. For the State as a whole, the increase was from 9.5 percent in 2023 to 20.2 percent in the first few months of 2025 (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2025). As of April 1, 2025, Virginia has been approved by the Children’s Bureau to implement the Washington State [Kinship Navigator program](#).

## Improving Child Welfare Through Investing in Family (HHS-2021-ACF-ACYF-CW-1921)

In 2021, the Children’s Bureau awarded [cooperative agreements](#) to five agencies to implement and evaluate an array of activities to increase kinship preparation and support and promote trusting relationships between out-of-home caregivers and parents of children and youth. The five awardees were Bethany Christian Services; University of Kansas Center for Research, Inc.; Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; Amara; and Spaulding for Children, Inc.

Activities funded by the grants included family search and engagement; direct services, resources, and training for kinship providers; knowledge building and collaboration among networks of local service providers; and policy analysis and other systems-level strategies to promote a more family-focused child well-being system. The 5-year grants will conclude in fiscal year 2026 and are expected to affect a broad range of outcomes:

- **Child and family outcomes:** Greater placement stability, preserved connections to family and community, increased social connections and normalcy, better permanency outcomes, decreased recurrent involvement with child welfare systems, and trauma healing and well-being
- **Caregiver outcomes:** Better caregiver preparation and support, greater access to information and resources, more trusting relationships with birth parents, and increased licensure rates
- **System outcomes:** Stronger community networks, better service coordination, and family-supportive policy changes

## CONCLUSION

Nothing can replace a child's family. Federal policy recognizes the family's central role in children's lives by supporting strategies and programs that center and promote kin engagement at every stage of child welfare involvement. The results of a kin-first approach are tangible: fewer unnecessary separations, more children remaining within their family networks, higher numbers of licensed relative caregivers, greater placement stability, and permanency achieved in ways that honor children's connections.

As these outcomes show, creating a kin-first culture is both possible and replicable when agencies align values, policy, and practice. Many families require some level of support to care for their kin, particularly when placements are sudden and unexpected, or they are already facing resource limitations. By making kin engagement a clear and consistent leadership priority, consulting with people with lived experience and those who support them, and identifying and removing policy and practice barriers, child welfare agencies can improve their effectiveness in finding, engaging, and supporting families to make and carry out decisions that are truly in the best interests of their children.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Child Welfare Information Gateway Publications

- ["Family Group Decision-Making: Implementing the Family Group Conference"](#) (Episode 16) gives an overview of how one agency implements the Family Group Conference model developed by the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect.
- [Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families](#) provides professionals with information to help children, youth, and adoptive families develop and maintain appropriate and evolving connections with families of origin.
- [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System](#) discusses the importance of cultivating a child welfare system that recognizes and responds appropriately to trauma and explores steps for transitioning to a trauma-informed system.
- [In-Home Services to Strengthen Children and Families](#) explores effective in-home services that are being used to help keep children and families safely together, as well as practical considerations for their implementation.
- [Kinship Guardianship as a Permanency Option](#), part of the State Statutes Series, reviews State laws and policies that allow a family member or other person with close ties to a child in out-of-home care to become that child's permanent guardian.
- [Supporting Child, Caregiver, and Family Well-Being in Times of Crisis: Strategies to Promote Effective Virtual and Phone Engagement](#) discusses ways that professionals outside of child protective services can act to support children and their caregivers and connect them with appropriate resources that may mitigate any risks for harm during crises.
- [Working With Kin Caregivers](#) provides child welfare professionals with information about trends in kinship care, caseworker and caregiver training, and examples of successful State and local kinship care programs.

### Other Resources

- [Checklist: Family First Prevention Services Act: Implementing the Provisions That Support Kinship Families](#) (Grandfamilies.org) provides concrete steps for implementing the five key FFPSA areas that affect kin caregivers: kinship navigator programs; national model family foster home licensing standards; title IV-E prevention programs; engaging family for children and youth placed in qualified residential treatment programs; and improvements to the interstate placement for foster care, guardianship, and adoption.
- [Kinship Promising Practices](#) (ABA Center on Children and the Law and Generations United) collects promising kinship policy and practice examples from across the country.
- [The National Center on Family Group Decision Making](#) provides multifaceted support for those wanting to bring family group decision-making or other family engagement approaches to their communities.

- [The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#) includes kinship topics in its Classroom-Based Training materials that address the unique aspects of being a kin caregiver.
- [Six Steps to Find a Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement](#) (National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning) offers a structured process to connect children with caring permanent connections through reunification, guardianship, or adoption.

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