



When I reflect on my time in the child welfare system, one of the most frustrating experiences was how invisible I often felt. Between the ages of 11 and 16, I lived with my maternal aunt, but no one ever explained to me that I was in kinship care. No caseworker visited, and no one required me to attend court. I genuinely believed I wasn't part of the system. It wasn't until years later, after I had been placed in a group home, that I discovered my situation had been part of a larger system all along.

During my time in the group home, I had a guardian ad litem (GAL), but her involvement was inconsistent. After a few months, she stopped visiting altogether. She still attended court hearings, but her reports were outdated, often highlighting behavioral issues I had already worked through. This misrepresentation felt like a betrayal. It wasn't until my caseworker finally visited and took the time to ask about my current situation that I realized how crucial consistent advocacy and communication could be.

Oftentimes, when betrayals and mistrust happen, you start to develop a shell to protect yourself because you feel as if no one is in your corner. This can develop as a need to constantly justify and defend yourself. Saying something as little as "I am here for you" or "I am here to support you. Tell me what you need." can really go a long way.

A supportive GAL and engaged caseworkers can profoundly shape a child's experience in the system. Their roles should go beyond attending court and submitting reports; they should build trust, listen, and genuinely advocate for the child's best interests. Had my GAL remained consistently involved and prioritized my voice, I might have felt more seen and supported.

Looking back, several supports could have made a significant difference for both me and my family. One-on-one engagement, where I was asked about my feelings and needs in a private and safe setting, would have made me feel valued. Additionally, access to trauma-informed mental health resources for both my caregiver and me could have helped us process our traumas and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Support groups for youth with similar lived experiences might have offered a sense of community and understanding that I desperately needed.

While financial resources are critical, emotional supports like therapy, mentorship, and regular check-ins are just as important. Caseworkers often focus on tangible needs like housing and food, but fostering emotional well-being can be transformative. A trusted adult who consistently showed up for me—even if just to talk—would have made a world of difference.

Connecting children to kin caregivers requires intentional effort. It starts by asking them who they trust and feel safe with. From there, professionals should explore extended family, community networks, and even mentors. Placement is just the beginning. Ongoing support for kin caregivers—financial assistance, mental health resources, and transportation support—is essential to maintaining stability. Regular check-ins and cultural sensitivity are also critical to ensure the placement meets the child’s needs and honors their identity.

Through my journey, I’ve learned that preserving family connections goes beyond placement. It’s about equipping families with the right tools and honoring the voices of those most affected. By doing so, we can create a system that truly prioritizes the well-being of every child.



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