



KINSHIP NAVIGATION MODELS AND INNOVATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY FIRST PREVENTION SERVICES ACT

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THE ISSUE: KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS

Kinship navigator programs are services that assist kinship caregivers in learning about and using programs and resources to meet the needs of the children they are raising, to provide support for the caregivers, and to promote partnerships among public and private agencies (Section 427(a)(1) of the Social Security Act). These programs work to improve caregivers' knowledge of services and assist them in accessing the services they need to support the family's ongoing stability (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Benefits to families who receive support from kinship navigator programs can include:

- increased rates of permanency for children in kinship care (Wheeler et. al., 2020; Schmidt & Treinen, 2021);
- enhanced placement stability (Wheeler et. al., 2020; Alessi, Forehand, & Winokur, 2022; Preston, 2021);
- access to needed services (Preston, 2021); and
- individualized supports beyond information and referrals (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Since 2008, Congress has provided federal funding to states to support the development of kinship navigator models (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). In 2018, Congress began appropriating annual funds to help states develop, enhance, or evaluate these kinship navigator programs. Also in 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act was enacted as part of Public Law (P.L.) 115-123 that began providing states with the opportunity to receive a 50% federal match for evidence-based kinship navigator programs. This ongoing federal investment has supported states' interest in developing kinship navigation models that meet these requirements.

Programs must do the following to qualify for ongoing funding under the title IV-E Kinship Navigator program:

- They must coordinate with other state or local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referrals, such as 2-1-1 and 3-1-1, to avoid fragmentation of services.
- They must be planned and operated in consultation with kinship caregivers, youth raised by kinship caregivers, government agencies, and community and faith-based organizations.
- They must establish information and referral systems that link kinship caregivers, support group facilitators and providers to each other. They need to provide enrollment information for federal, state, and local benefits, relevant trainings, and relevant legal assistance.
- They need to provide outreach to kinship care families, including through a website.
- They should promote partnerships between public and private agencies, including schools, faith-based organizations, and government agencies (Administration for Children and Families, 2018b).

Kinship navigator programs may do the following:

- Establish and support a kinship care ombudsman with authority to intervene and help kinship caregivers access services.
- Support any other activities designed to assist kinship caregivers in obtaining benefits and services to improve their caregiving (Administration for Children and Families, 2018b).

To qualify for federal reimbursement, the program must meet the Title IV-E Clearinghouse criteria for a “promising,” “supported,” or “well-supported” practice, as defined in the [Title IV-E Clearinghouse Handbook of Standards and Procedures, 2019](#) (Wilson et. al., 2019). The Title IV-E Clearinghouse conducts reviews of research on eligible programs, including evaluations of kinship navigator programs. To be reviewed and approved by the Clearinghouse as an evidence-based program, the Clearinghouse must determine that evaluations of the program meet standards based on criteria that align with the Family First Prevention Services Act, including indicating that the program had positive impacts (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). Child welfare jurisdictions can either design, implement, and evaluate their own kinship navigator program and submit it to the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse for review or they can implement one of the evidence-based programs already rated by the Clearinghouse.

THE EVIDENCE: KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS ON THE TITLE IV-E CLEARINGHOUSE

As of August 2023, there are four kinship navigator programs that have been rated as either “promising” or “supported” on the Title IV-E Federal Clearinghouse and approved to receive ongoing federal reimbursement. The following programs have met these criteria: Arizona Kinship Support Services (supported), Colorado Kinnected Kinship Navigator Program (promising), Kinship Supports Intervention of Ohio/ProtectOHIO (promising), and the Foster Kinship Navigator Program in Nevada (promising; Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, 2023b).

Kinship Target Population Types

Informal: Arrangements made by families, with or without legal recognition of the caregiver’s status.

Formal: Child/children is/are placed in the legal custody of the State by a judge, and then placed in the physical custody of a kinship caregiver (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022).

Diverted: Voluntary move of a child/children into the care of a relative or close family friend after coming to the attention of the child welfare agency (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013).

Table 1. Comparison of Kinship Navigation Program Components

Program name	Arizona Kinship Support Services	Colorado Kinconnected Kinship Navigator Program	ProtectOhio Kinship Supports Intervention	Foster Kinship Navigator Program
Target population	Informal & formal kinship families served*	Formal kinship families	Formal kinship families	Informal & formal kinship families served*
Kinship population eligibility	Families who are relatives or nonrelatives and have a significant relationship to a child not born to them	Child must be both: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – in open child welfare involvement, but doesn't need to be court-involved – entering a new certified or non-certified kinship placement/living arrangement, but not one they have been living with already 	All children in kinship care with Public Children Services Agency (PCSA) cases that are open to ongoing services, regardless of custody status or supervision orders	Families can be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – licensed or unlicensed kinship foster parents – post-diversion kinship caregivers & private kinship caregivers – in transition (for example,; acting as a safety plan resource) – adoptive kinship parents
Model core components	Tiered Approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Information, referral, connection – Assessment; service plan; appointment scheduling; aftercare planning – Legal services, support groups (including for caregivers of children with incarcerated parents); in-person events w/ child care 	Blended Approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Assessment/ information (Stress Index) – Caregiver selects clusters of services: family search; facilitated family engagement; kinship supports – Kinship supports include service coordination; navigator visits; respite; child care; concrete supports 	Tiered Approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Information, referral, connection – Mental health/ substance use assessment – Caregiver training – Concrete supports – <i>Optional:</i> legal services; child care; respite 	Tiered Approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Information, assessment, referral, connection (including support groups) – Case management: benefits coordination; flex funds; notary; case plan
Demonstrated outcomes**	Child permanency: least restrictive placement & planned, permanent exits	Child permanency: planned, permanent exits	Child permanency: placement stability	Child permanency: placement stability
Rating	Supported	Promising	Promising	Promising

*ONLY formal kinship family data captured in program evaluation

**As defined by the Clearinghouse, a program or service with demonstrated outcomes exhibits statistically significant favorable effects on a target outcome (if rated promising), or a sustained favorable effect of at least 6 months on a target outcome (if rated supported; Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, 2023c)

Table 1 summarizes the key features of the four kinship programs currently rated on the Title IV-E Clearinghouse. Notably, all four programs currently approved for federal reimbursement have selected only formal kinship families for inclusion in their evaluations. While Arizona Kinship Support Services (AKSS) and Nevada’s Foster Kinship programs both serve formal and informal families, currently no kinship programs on the Clearinghouse include informal kinship families in their program evaluations. This reflects the national landscape of kinship care, which often focuses on formal kinship families that have current or recent involvement in local departments of

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child welfare and leaves informal kinship families unserved or underserved (Malm et al., 2019). The distinction between formal and informal kinship families is significant, because for every child in a formal kinship arrangement, there are an estimated 18 children being raised by informal caregivers outside of the child welfare system (Generations United, 2021). Informal kinship families fall into an eligibility gap that impacts their assessment for, and access to, services typically available to formal kinship families. For example, informal kinship families are eligible only for child-only TANF and their unique service needs are not consistently assessed and met (Malm et al., 2019). Developing clear, consistent practice protocols for assessing and serving informal kinship families is a crucial step in expanding the preventative services available outside of the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

The models represented in this brief include two key approaches to kinship model design. In Table 1, these approaches are broken down into a summarized description of each program’s services. AKSS, ProtectOhio, and Nevada’s Foster Kinship Program have all designed a similar “tiered” approach to service provision (Arizona’s Children Association, 2017; ProtectOHIO, 2011; Foster Kinship, 2021). The service is initiated with Tier 1, information and referral or intake. Then the service follows the next two tiers: Tier 2, Assessment, and Tier 3, Service Planning and Case Management/Coordination. Each program offers increased intensity of services at each tier as aligned with the needs of the caregiver, with economic and concrete supports typically made available following completion of the caregiver’s needs assessment at Tier 2. Each program offers a variety of concrete and economic supports to meet the unique service goals of each family, including but not limited to flexible funding, legal services, child care, and support groups. The AKSS model notably offers a support group designed for caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated.

In contrast, Colorado’s Kinnected Kinship Navigator program designed a “blended” approach, which initiates services with formal kinship families using three different caregiver assessments (Alessi, Berzinskas, et al., 2022). The results of these assessments inform a kinship caregiver and their navigator about which blends of services (such as facilitated family engagement, kinship supports, family search, or a combination of any of these three) might be most effective to meet a caregiver’s needs. In June 2023, the Title IV-E Clearinghouse announced that the Washington Kinship Navigator Pilot will be reviewed in the next round of assessments. If rated as promising or supported, Washington’s Kinship Navigation Pilot program model would be the first approved for federal reimbursement on the Title IV-E Clearinghouse that includes both formal and informal families in their service and evaluation (Washington State Department of Children Youth and Families, 2023).

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD EVIDENCE: INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN KINSHIP NAVIGATION

Additional kinship navigator programs in earlier stages of development, implementation, and evaluation around the country are integrating innovative model components into their program design in response to the goals and identified needs of their target populations. These programs often include an expansive target population, including formal, informal, and diverted kinship families, and provide economic and concrete supports. Select innovations observed in developing kinship navigation models include: a benefits coordinator on staff to support families' access to local, state, and federal benefits programs; hiring peer navigators with lived expertise to work directly with kinship families; and including a legal advocate on staff to support families with their legal questions and needs (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023).

Many kinship navigator programs offer economic and concrete supports to provide families immediate relief and safeguard stability. These are essential program components as the 2022 Generations United "State of Grandfamilies" report cited census data that found that 23% of grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households are living under the poverty level, and when a parent is not present in the home, this rises to 31% living in poverty, compared to 16% of children nationwide (Generations United, 2022a). Additionally, the average monthly TANF child-only grant payment is \$249, which usually only covers a small portion of the expenses of raising a child (Generations United, 2022b). Federal Guidance clarified that "kinship navigator funds appropriated under title IV-B, subpart 2 may be used for concrete supports, such as to purchase bus tokens or passes, gas vouchers or grocery store cards when necessary to fulfill the purpose of the program to help caregivers access existing benefits and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising and their own needs" (Administration for Children and Families, 2021). Subsequently, the 2023 Government Accountability Office's report found that "of the 46 states reporting they provide individualized support to kinship families, 23 provide economic and concrete supports" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023, p. 14). These programs reported "providing families with financial support or household items, such as help with expenses for rent, utilities, groceries, gas, and child care, as well as tangible goods including clothing, beds, and cribs" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023, p. 14). The kinship navigator programs that provide low-barrier access to cash assistance and concrete goods help fill the gap in services that aim to stabilize kinship families.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Child welfare agency leaders and decision-makers may consider the following sequenced activities when preparing to design or implement an evidence-based kinship navigator program eligible for federal reimbursement.

Leaders should engage a diverse and representative set of partners to determine the goals and objectives for kinship navigation support in the jurisdiction. Collaborators will optimally include partnering state and local agencies, Tribal governments, community representatives, and individuals with lived expertise. It will be helpful to establish a governance structure to sustain the teaming plan and leadership of individuals with lived expertise while conducting the activities identified below.

Stakeholder Engagement and Goal Setting

The first step in designing an evidence-based kinship navigator program is to gather, analyze, and make meaning of quantitative and qualitative data to understand the prevalence of formal, diverted, and informal kinship care in your jurisdiction and the service and support needs of kinship caregivers. The following activities might be a part of this step:

- Scan existing kinship navigation and support services in your jurisdiction. Engage entities that may also be serving your intended target population to inform the landscape scan (such as Areas on Again, 211, and others).
- Assess the extent to which existing programming meets the needs of the kinship caregiver population across your jurisdiction. Consider the distinct needs of the different groups of kinship caregivers and whether they are sufficiently addressed. Assess strengths and gaps in the reach of services, as well as fidelity and quality of implementation.
- Determine whether it is viable to invest in a rigorous evaluation of existing programming to build evidence for your jurisdiction's kinship navigation model in alignment with Title IV-E Clearinghouse standards.

Establishing Kinship Navigation Services

If the current kinship navigation services in your jurisdiction are not robust or defined enough, or if they are not effectively meeting the needs of your target populations, explore whether any of the existing models on the Title IV-E Clearinghouse align with the goals and objectives for kinship navigation and supports in your jurisdiction. The following steps might help:

- Be as expansive as possible when determining target populations for kinship navigation models. Unlike other services that can be reimbursed by the Families First Prevention Services Act, Kinship Navigator programs do not need children to be identified as "candidates for foster care" in order to be eligible for services (Administration for Children and Families, 2018a). This means that any family could contact the program and receive services if they meet the eligibility requirements. Kinship Navigation models can include broad target populations that can be accessed by formal and informal caregivers, fictive kin, postadoptive caregivers, and caregivers who have never come to the attention of child welfare.
- Prior to implementation, assess for readiness. Support implementation efforts by reviewing existing infrastructure and staffing capacity needed to implement and sustain a new program (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018).
- Engage fiscal partners early to determine methods and mechanisms for calculating costs associated with administering a kinship navigator program.

Implementing and Evaluating Models

Jurisdictions should look for existing models on the Clearinghouse that sufficiently align with the goals and objectives of kinship navigation and support, the needs of the target population(s), or the jurisdiction's infrastructure and implementation capacity. If existing models do not sufficiently align, determine whether it makes sense to invest in customizing a kinship model to your jurisdiction. This would require going through the design, implementation, and evaluation stages. Consider the following steps:

- Be thoughtful and realistic when determining timeframes for design, implementation, and evaluation. Consider the length of time it realistically takes to establish appropriate partnerships, design a new program, install the

appropriate infrastructure, implement the model with quality and fidelity, and execute an effectiveness trial. It may take several years to move through each phase of a rigorous evidence-building process (Framework Workgroup, 2014).

- Conduct an evaluability assessment prior to evaluating the kinship navigator model (Davies, 2021).
- For the evaluation, include an enrollment period and also allocate 6–12 months beyond this period to continue to collect data on participating families. For new kinship programs, consider, at minimum, a 1-year enrollment period to recruit enough families into the program.
- For the model evaluation period, a program needs at least 6 months of data that show positive outcomes to receive a “Promising” review, and 12 months to receive a “Supported” review from the Clearinghouse. To receive a “Well Supported” review, the program needs to be evaluated by multiple studies (Wilson et. al., 2019).
- Plan to allocate resources for marketing and outreach so that eligible families learn about the program.

Regardless of whether a jurisdiction is investing in current kinship programming, a model on the Clearinghouse, or a new model, diverted and informal caregivers should be included in the target population. Kinship families are often informal and lack support from official pathways (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013), so it is best practice to include formal, informal, and diverted kinship families, as well as post-adoptive kinship families in the program’s target population. Program Instruction 18-11 from the Children’s Bureau states that jurisdictions have flexibility in defining the target population of their kinship navigator programs: “A title IV-E agency has discretion to determine the scope of the population to be served through its Kinship Navigator program, including children being cared for by kin in foster care or legal guardianship arrangements, children at risk of entering foster care being cared for by kin, and children being cared for by kin outside of the child welfare system” (Administration for Children and Families, 2018b).

During the process of evaluation, evaluators should apply a Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CREE) approach in efforts to center the perspectives of those most impacted by the program, individuals with lived expertise, and principles of social justice (Lorthridge et al., in press).

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