



# Promoting Stability in Kinship Foster Homes

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## CHAPIN HALL POLICY BRIEF

**Child welfare leaders are prioritizing relatives as caregivers, but there is considerable variation across states regarding percentage of children in kinship foster homes.**

### THE ISSUE

Prioritizing family preservation and preventing family separation whenever possible is a core function of child welfare agencies. While foster care entries have steadily declined over the past 5 years, over 200,000 children still entered foster care in 2021.<sup>1</sup> When family separation does occur, placement with relatives or fictive kin—individuals with a nonbiological but emotional connection to the child<sup>2</sup>—is the next preferred option. Placement in these kinship foster homes increases the likelihood of a child living in an environment that is most like their family of origin.

The benefits of kinship foster care have been supported by research. Children living in kinship homes have fewer behavioral problems and mental health disorders, improved well-being, similar reunification rates, and greater placement stability when compared to non-kin placements.<sup>3, 4</sup> Thus, child welfare leaders have progressively prioritized relative caregivers, as demonstrated by the increase in use of kinship homes in foster care from 26% in 2007 to 34% in 2021, with a total of 134,000 children being placed with relatives and fictive kin in 2021.<sup>5-7</sup> Even with the benefits and nationwide increase in the engagement of relative caregivers, there is considerable variation across states regarding percentage of children in kinship foster homes (ranging from 4% to 46%) due to differences in existing policies and practices.<sup>8</sup>

Creating new policies can promote, increase, and maintain kinship foster homes by reducing challenges and providing resources that support stability. However, to be successful, these policies need to acknowledge the unique challenges kinship caregivers face. For example, relative and fictive kin homes are more likely to include individuals who are struggling financially<sup>9</sup> and live in areas with limited resources<sup>10</sup> when compared to the general population. Kinship caregivers who are Black and Indigenous also tend to be older, in poorer health, and have less access to services when compared to Caucasian caregivers.<sup>11, 12</sup> Thus policymakers and child welfare leadership must recognize the specific challenges kinship families face when considering new policy and practice changes. Only then can they create practices and resources—namely, economic and concrete supports—that prioritize meeting families' basic needs and reduce biases and disparities surrounding Black and Brown kinship caregivers and children.

Existing policies and procedures also need to be updated to help reduce financial strain and connect kinship foster families to services. For example, many current policies require kinship caregivers to go through a confusing and lengthy process to become licensed foster homes. Licensing policies have also been used to increase obstacles for families who do not fit the assumptions of a safe placement, exacerbating discriminatory practices. Example obstacles include restrictions on type of beds (for example, not allowing bunk beds), requiring recycling, setting upper age limits, and a minimum education level. These qualifiers in state's approval processes can be used to stop placements with relative and fictive kin even when they do not necessarily relate to the safety of the child.<sup>13-15</sup>

Overall, child welfare jurisdictions are increasingly shifting resources to prioritize placement with kinship families when family preservation is not possible. Changes to policy and practice are needed to address—and provide support for overcoming—the unique obstacles kinship caregivers face in achieving stability and well-being for their relative children and families.

## THE EVIDENCE

### **Additional resources are needed to promote placement stability in kinship foster homes.**

Although kinship placements are more stable than other types of placements, lack of resources to support the financial, mental, and emotional well-being of children and caregivers increases the likelihood of placement disruption.<sup>16-18</sup> This includes support for stable housing, accessing health care, connecting to affordable legal representation, and increasing accessibility to resources that directly support the children placed in their home.

### **Black and Indigenous kinship foster families experience racism in their engagement with child welfare agencies, which can impact placement decisions and access to resources and supports.**

Child welfare professionals and the legal community have historically engaged in biased practices, including over-surveillance of family activities and assuming negative actions of biological parents are also conducted by other Black and Indigenous family members.<sup>19-22</sup> The legal and vague standard of doing what is *in the best interest of the child* has allowed decisions to be “cluttered with outmoded metaphors, simplistic images, and unexamined narratives.”<sup>23</sup> This has impeded the ability of Black and Indigenous families to become licensed and meet the criteria for receiving resources.

**Kinship foster families have difficulty obtaining financial support for the additional child(ren) placed in their homes.** Poverty rates among kinship caregivers are twice as high as compared to the general population.<sup>24</sup> Policies about how relative caregivers should be paid exist in only one-third of states and qualifying for TANF or foster care payment depends on whether the caregiver meets the state's definition of *relative*, among other standards.<sup>25</sup>

**Existing state policies to approve and license kinship foster homes are barriers to placing and maintaining children in safe homes.** Families who do not become licensed are less likely to receive referrals to resources and receive reduced monthly payments when compared to licensed families.<sup>26-27</sup> The procedure, recognition, and resulting benefits of becoming a licensed kinship caregiver can vary from state to state. Without specific knowledge of the process, families can become confused about their legal options, accessing available resources, and overcoming obstacles (these include financial support, accessing medical care for the child, and even enrolling the child in school).

**Nonlicensed kinship families often receive significantly less financial support than nonrelative foster homes.** Because they do not understand how to obtain financial support, less than half of kinship families receive SNAP or Medicaid despite having the need and being eligible.<sup>28</sup> Compared to foster family homes, nonlicensed kinship families receive \$250 less in average monthly payments. Further, in 17 states, kinship families who do not qualify for Title IV-E guardianship subsidies cannot receive guardianship assistance payments.<sup>29-31</sup>

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Strengthen kinship caregiving by recognizing fictive kin, eliminating licensing barriers, providing equitable financial support, and expanding anti-poverty policies to enhance family stability.**

**Expand existing policies to include fictive kin.** This would increase access to resources for kin caregivers, especially to African American, Black Caribbean, and LGBTQ families who rely more on fictive kin for familial support.<sup>32-34</sup> Specifically, this change would provide fictive kin with an expedited licensing process and access to current and future financial resources provided to kinship families.

**Formalize the priority of kinship families by developing barriers to non-kin placements.** For example, [Tennessee](#)<sup>35</sup> requires completion of a Kinship Exception Request form that must be approved before a child is placed in a non-kin home. When a child is not placed with relatives or kin in [New York](#)<sup>36</sup>, there is a secondary review by a person in a supervisory or managerial role to confirm that all efforts were taken to find an available and appropriate kinship placement.

**Maximize opportunities to approve or license kinship caregivers to ensure families receive payments to care for these children.** There are two primary ways to maximize opportunities for kinship caregivers. First, child welfare leadership should assess barriers to licensing kinship caregivers and explore jurisdictional data on kinship licensure. Consider convening key stakeholders to discuss information surrounding kinship licensing and determine how the [proposed rule for separate licensing standards](#)<sup>37</sup> could support the goal of increasing the number of formal kinship caregivers who obtain licensure.

Second, agencies should implement and fully leverage the provision in the [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#)<sup>38</sup> that allows non-safety-related licensing standards to be waived when appropriate. This could help provide resources quickly to safe and suitable kinship homes. Examples of applying this provision have included waiving the number of hours of training required, being flexible on space requirements, allowing children to share bedrooms, and, when appropriate, overlooking old misdemeanor charges.<sup>39</sup>

**Provide additional and immediate financial support** to kin caregivers that—at least—matches payments provided to licensed foster family homes. There are several examples of states doing this. First, [Indiana](#)<sup>40</sup> provides up to \$300 monthly for every child placed with a relative, regardless of whether they are in a licensed foster home. In addition, [New Jersey's](#)<sup>41</sup> Kinship Care Subsidy and [Virginia's](#)<sup>42</sup> Relative Maintenance Support Payment programs provide additional funding for kinship caregivers if it results in the child not entering foster care.

Regarding expediency of payments, [Oklahoma](#)<sup>43</sup> begins paying kinship caregivers when the child has been placed in the home and—if they are not licensed after 60 days—the family still receives financial support if the delay is due to the state. [Ohio](#)<sup>44</sup> has a Kinship Permanency Incentive program that provides financial assistance to help with the initial costs of placing a child in the home.

**Ensure that existing and new policies provide support for meeting kinship caregivers' economic and concrete needs.** Poverty significantly impacts the well-being of a family. Yet even modest support can make a home more likely to be safe and stable.<sup>45</sup> Introducing or expanding upon anti-poverty policies to include kinship families would help reduce the likelihood of families needing intensive services and increase the long-term placement of the child in the home.<sup>46</sup> Reviewing the Center on Poverty and Social Policy's [aggregation](#)<sup>47</sup> of anti-poverty policies and programs across the country could help inspire and guide such changes.

## PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

**Adopt program models that search for relatives and fictive kin when children have been separated from their families or are identified as being at risk of family separation.** Identifying relative and fictive kin is the first step toward engaging them as kinship foster parents. Innovative examples of doing this work includes [Missouri's](#)<sup>48</sup> 30 Days to Family Goal which involves a 12- to 20-week intensive process to locate relatives/kin and [Ohio's](#)<sup>49</sup> Kinnect to Family program that searches for relatives/kin for all children, not just those entering care. Models like these have been shown to find—on average—more than 150 potential kinship caregivers and to save the state over \$10,000 for each child involved.<sup>48-49</sup>

**Provide additional guidelines for deciding the *best interest of the child* to decrease subjective decisions being made.** Racial biases are still demonstrated by child welfare professionals and the legal community, decreasing the likelihood of placements in Black and Indigenous kinship homes.<sup>19-22</sup> Updating existing guidance on placement decisions to reduce subjectivity in decision making is recommended. This includes [assessing jurisdictions' existing standards](#)<sup>50</sup> to understand what changes can be made to reduce biases when making placement decisions. Training materials should also incorporate information focused on the unique strengths and needs of kinship families and on reducing implicit biases (one example is [Engaging Kinship Caregivers by Joseph Crumbley](#)<sup>51</sup>).

**Use the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) as a guide on how to prioritize children's cultural heritage when finding and reunifying them with their relatives or fictive kin.** ICWA<sup>52</sup> empowers Tribal governments to exercise their sovereignty in child welfare cases that include Native American children who are affiliated with their Tribe. This Act gives Native families exclusive jurisdiction over the case and prioritizes their community and culture. ICWA has been noted by many in child welfare as setting the "gold standard"<sup>53</sup> for practices. The Act sets a higher standard for removing a child from a home and promotes active efforts to place Native children with Native families. To capitalize on the strengths of ICWA when supporting placements with relatives and fictive kin, jurisdictions should review and apply [Casey's \(2022\)](#)<sup>53</sup> guiding questions to current policies and practices.

**Incorporate families' and youth's voices to recognize and shift practices around engaging and supporting kinship caregivers.** Those who have experienced child welfare can provide a unique and powerful perspective on improving policies, practices, and programs to support maintaining kinship placements. Strategies for integrating family and youth voices when guiding practice changes can be found in the Capacity Building Center for States' [publication](#)<sup>54</sup> and Casey Family Programs' [brief](#).<sup>55</sup>

**Implement intentional strategies and programs to facilitate kin caregivers' connection to benefits, services, and supports they need to care for their family.** This includes implementing a kinship navigator program to connect kinship caregivers to accessible resources. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 provides jurisdictions with federal financial reimbursement for evidence-based kinship navigation programs.<sup>56</sup> Additional information about existing programs can be found in [Steinmetz and Fox](#).<sup>57</sup> Other helpful resources include

developing a website or app (for example, [Hawaii's](#)<sup>58</sup> resource family app) that facilitates connections to supports and services and connecting families to legal services (such as [California's](#)<sup>59</sup> self-help guide).

**Build community capacity to provide necessary resources to kinship families and establish sustainable funding sources for those efforts.** Community agencies are valuable partners for establishing a robust service array continuum for kinship caregivers. One example of this work is [Allegheny County's](#)<sup>60</sup> partnership with a community organization to provide in-home services, emergency assistance, respite care, transportation, and training for kinship families. Another example is University of [South Florida's](#)<sup>61</sup> calling center that provides kinship caregivers with information and referrals to services.

There might also be community partners currently providing resources that would be useful for kinship families, but who are unable to reach those families. Providing financial assistance to expand their work could improve stability of kinship placements. For example, [Ohio](#)<sup>62</sup> utilizes a trust fund to pay for information and referral services, peer support, and parent education programs while [New Mexico](#)<sup>63</sup> funds four legal service organizations to help kinship caregivers with legal issues.

**Consider hiring dedicated staff that solely focus on kinship families.** Having child welfare staff solely focused on kinship families will improve their ability to recognize the unique challenges these families face. One way to do this is to have staff that exclusively focus on kinship licensing, as is done in [Connecticut](#)<sup>64</sup>. Another option—found in [New York](#)<sup>65</sup>—is to delegate a kinship expert to help with training, answer questions, and advocate for changes in practice and policy.

**Routinely review, aggregate, and disseminate data and evidence about kinship families to fully understand how to continuously support these valued caregivers.** It is important to consistently review data to understand what can be changed to better support kinship families. Reviewing evidence from Child and Family Services Reviews by placement type can help jurisdictions further understand the outcomes and challenges kinship family members are experiencing. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) cycles should also incorporate discussions specific to promoting and maintaining kinship placements when considering program improvement strategies.

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[Claire Kimberly](#), Policy Analyst

# RECOMMENDED CITATION

Kimberly, C. (2023). *Promoting stability in kinship foster homes*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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