



Commitment to Kin

Elements of a support and service system for kinship care

A report from Casey Family Programs

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About Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care.

Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child-welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the United States.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

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Preface

A consensus process generated the recommendations in this report.

It draws on the experience and expertise of people who know kinship care from different perspectives: Casey Family Programs staff who work closely with kinship families, child welfare experts outside Casey, the judiciary, research organizations and universities, and, last but not least, kinship family members, including adults and children.

A working draft was developed in August 2003 by a representative group of Casey Family Program staff and outside experts. That draft was then refined through a two-day meeting with 60 kinship care experts from across the United States. This final report is being distributed to those meeting attendants with our appreciation of their generous participation.

—April 2004

Participants at the Kinship Care Expert Panel meeting held at the St. Gregory Hotel in Washington, D.C., on October 28 and 29, 2003

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Introduction

The concept of “kinship care” has emerged in the lexicon of child welfare services and practices only over the past two decades.

Relatives and other significant adults in families’ lives have always played a role in raising children when their parents could not care for them. The care, nurturing, and protection of children by extended family is, in fact, a longstanding tradition in all cultures. This tradition is particularly strong in the African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Latino communities—the communities of color most significantly affected by interventions by the child welfare system.

As child welfare systems in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to look to and rely on relatives to care for children, increasing attention has been given to “formal” or “public” kinship care. Only within the past few years has attention also focused on “informal” or “private” kinship care—that is, the traditional practice of extended families and other significant adults in a family’s life taking on responsibility for the care, nurturance, and protection of children in a voluntary manner.

This report addresses the whole spectrum of child-caring arrangements known as kinship care. We use the term **kinship family** to refer to the entire family constellation, including both caregivers and youth. The term **kinship caregivers** refers to the adults who provide care, nurturing, and protection for youth.

We offer here a guide for the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, practices, services, and supports for kinship families.

The report includes:

- A brief overview that examines the cultural traditions and nature of kinship care, including working definitions of “formal” and “informal” kinship care
- An outline of 10 guiding principles that are needed to ensure that services and supports are appropriate and responsive to the needs of all kinship families
- A discussion of 20 components of an optimal service delivery system: one that recognizes the value of kinship care, the strengths and needs of kinship families, and the obligations of the child welfare system—working in collaboration with other key service systems and community-based organizations—to respond appropriately and responsively to the needs of kinship families
- A glossary of terms
- A bibliography

The rationale for this report

Some of the issues and needs addressed here are unique to kinship families. At the same time, many of the service and support needs of kinship families are no different from the needs of all families. We focus here on kinship families to ensure that their needs—whether unique or shared—are specifically recognized and to ensure that quality services and supports are provided in responsive ways.

We approach kinship care from a strengths-based perspective. We see kinship families—including children and youth—as active participants in the development, implementation, and evaluation of a system that will optimally serve them.

Several beliefs underlie our recommendations:

- Children, families, and communities are connected
- Only through collaboration can we successfully develop, implement, and evaluate a service system for kinship families. Children, birth families, kinship families, community-based organizations (including faith-based organizations), and public systems—including the child welfare, judicial, educational, mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment systems—are connected and must work together collaboratively
- Kinship families are different, and their needs change over time. Their circumstances vary, their needs for services and support differ, and a child or youth's needs for safety, well-being, and permanency may translate differently for different kinship families. Families change over time: their service and support needs evolve as children grow and the family develops

There are significant impediments to an effective service system for kinship families, many of whom are families of color. Discriminatory practices and attitudes bring children of color into the child welfare system in disproportionate numbers. The dynamics of institutional racism as well as sexist and classist attitudes also have resulted in poorer services and supports for families of color. These dynamics have created barriers to needed services and supports that they often find difficult to surmount. This report focuses on eliminating these barriers in order to create an optimal system of service delivery for all kinship families.

Kinship Care: An Overview

The tradition of extended family and other significant adults caring for children when the child or youth's parents are not able to do so is strong in all cultures. Virtually every individual can recount a personal story of a grandmother, aunt, or other family member taking responsibility for a child or youth in the family temporarily or for a longer period of time—a step usually taken without the involvement of any government system in the family's life.

The cultural tradition of kinship care

Families from communities of color—who historically have been significantly impacted by the child welfare system—have particularly rich traditions of extended family members' care of children. Their key role includes caring for children and maintaining the family—serving, in the terms of child welfare professionals, a “family preservation” role. This tradition has been based on the strengths of family members and networks of community support to ensure that children remain within their own families and communities when parents cannot provide the care, protection, and nurturing that children need.

The tradition of kinship care in the African American community began in ancient African cultures. The African proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child,” speaks to the concept of group responsibility and commitment to children. The strong role of extended family continued in the United States during the slavery era when relatives and nonrelatives on slave-holding plantations cared for children who were separated from their parents.

Kinship care in contemporary African American communities carries on the African traditions and provides cultural continuity for families. This tradition involves temporary care for children, particularly in times of family crises, as well as the informal adoption of children by extended family members such as grandmothers, sisters, and aunts, and by non-blood kin and neighbors.

In the American Indian and Alaska Native cultures, extended family, elders, and other adults in the tribal community play significant roles in parenting children. Traditionally, children are seen as sacred beings from the spirit world, and it is believed that they need to be cared for well, or they will be taken from the family and returned to the spirit world. The Native child is viewed as born into two mutual relational systems—the biological family and the tribal kinship network—and, as a result, the entire extended family and the broader tribal community have child-rearing responsibility.

Native children are taught that they are related to everyone and have a sense of interconnectedness with other tribal members. Elders are revered as teachers, and many people help influence, nurture, instill values, teach, and discipline the child or

youth. Depending on the tribal community, a child or youth may be raised within a kinship family even when the birth parents are capable of raising their children. Within this context, the child or youth is not at risk of entering the child welfare system. Instead, the relatives are fulfilling a traditional caregiving role in helping to raise the child or youth.

Extended family caregiving is also a strength of Latino families. Latino communities embrace values of strong familial commitment, high levels of family support, and geographic closeness to relatives. For many Latinos, the only—and the culturally preferred resource for child rearing—is the extended family.

Compadrazgo (co-parenting and godparenting) is one way in which kinship care is emphasized in Latino cultures. When Latino families face stressful situations, the extended family support systems last as long as care of children is needed and may even extend until the child or youth is an adult.

African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Latino cultural traditions illustrate the role of families as natural helping networks in which families support one another, families are kept together, and the need for government involvement in families' lives is prevented. Because of village, tribal, and extended family support, there is no need for children to enter foster care in order to ensure that they have safe, nurturing care and are protected.

As the concept of kinship care has emerged, it has not always fully recognized the historical tradition of kin stepping forward to ensure the safety and well-being of children on a purely private basis. Focus, to a great extent, has been on the role of kin when children must be legally removed from the care and custody of their parents and placed formally into the child welfare system. While this aspect of kinship care is important, it is also critical to acknowledge that the historical roots of kinship care lie in family preservation—that is, keeping children whose parents cannot care for them within their own families and within their own communities.

A working definition of kinship care

Kinship care has come to be recognized as a critical aspect of child welfare practice.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, growing numbers of children were entering foster care. Simultaneously, the number of traditional foster families was declining. Child welfare systems began to look to extended families as resources for the care of children and youth who entered the formal child welfare system. Since that time, increasing numbers of children who enter foster care have been placed in the care of kin.

This significant shift in caregiving arrangements—from an almost exclusive reliance on unrelated foster families to a greater reliance on relatives as caregivers—has caused child welfare professionals to focus on the appropriateness and relevance of policies, practices, services, and supports for this population of children in foster care and their kinship families. Policy and practice customarily have determined what services and

supports are available based on whether kinship care is informally provided (arranged privately among family members) or formally provided (arranged with some involvement of the public child welfare system).

The U.S. Census Bureau now collects data on children in kinship care. In 1998, 2.1 million children lived in the homes of relatives without a parent being present. Public child-welfare agencies arranged for kin to care for children in about 23 percent of these arrangements. Child welfare agencies had no role in placing or supporting the children or their relatives in the remaining 77 percent.

Efforts have been made to reach consensus on the definition of kinship care and the similarities and differences among its different forms. As a starting point, it is important to reach an understanding of who is “kin.” At both the state and federal level, “kin” tend to be defined narrowly, with a focus primarily on biological relationships. And definitions are not consistent: some states define kin differently for different programs or benefits.

We take the view that it is families themselves who define “kin.” Who falls within the concept of “family” and who can be depended upon to provide for the care, nurturing, teaching, and protection of children varies among families and communities.

A range of individuals may be considered kin. Kin may include both maternal and paternal relatives, and it may include the adult siblings of younger children. Depending on the individual family’s relationships and the community’s traditions, kin also may extend to individuals not biologically or legally related to the family but who are, nonetheless, perceived as “family.”

In some cases, these individuals (sometimes referred to as “fictive kin”) are formally recognized—as in the Latino *compadrazgo* tradition of designating godparents. Or they may be informally recognized within the family—as in the practice of referring to individuals not biologically related to the family as “aunt” or “uncle.”

In the Native American culture, relative-making or “adoption” ceremonies acknowledge new members of a family. Individuals who participate in these ceremonies do so with an understanding that they are making a lifelong commitment to support and care for their newly made relative, just as they would their blood relative. This ceremony is viewed with the same sense of commitment as adoptions that are processed through the court system and bound by a legal document.

Using this definition of kin, Casey Family Programs has developed the following working definitions:

Kinship care is the full-time care, nurturing, teaching, and protection of children by relatives (through blood, adoption, or marriage), tribes or clan members, and godparents; stepparents, or any adult who has a bond which the child, youth, or family recognizes as significant to them.

Informal (or private) kinship care is parenting of children by kin as a result of a decision by the family. A social worker may be involved in helping family members plan for the child or youth, but a child welfare agency does not assume legal custody of or responsibility for the child or youth. Because the parents still have custody of the child or youth, kin need not be approved, licensed, or supervised by the state, yet kin provide the full-time care, protection, and nurturing that the child or youth needs.

Formal (or public) kinship care is parenting of children by kin as a result of a determination by the court and the child protective service agency. The courts rule that the child or youth must be separated from his or her parents because of abuse, neglect, dependency, abandonment, or special medical circumstances. Formal kinship care is linked to state, tribal, and federal child welfare laws because the child or youth is placed in the legal custody of the child welfare agency, yet kin provide the full-time care, protection, and nurturing that the child or youth needs.

Recently Rob Geen, who edited *Kinship Care: Making the Most of a Valuable Resource* (2003, Urban Institute Press), has provided an alternative to this distinction:

Given the limitations of the terms *formal* and *informal*, the authors in this book refer to all kinship care arrangements that occur without the child welfare agency's involvement as private kinship care and all kinship care arrangements that occur with child welfare contact as either kinship foster care (if the child is in state custody) or voluntary kinship care. . . . kinship foster care may or may not be licensed in the same way as traditional non-kin foster care. And voluntary kinship care arrangements may or may not receive any on-going supervision from child welfare authorities or the juvenile court.

Our simpler terms and definitions provide useful ways to approach a discussion of kinship care and the elements of a service and support system for kinship families. We recognize that these terms over-simplify the rich array of caregiving arrangements that no definition can fully capture.

In addition, we recognize that a family's caregiving arrangements may change over time. Privately arranged kinship care may at some point take on a public character if it becomes necessary for the child welfare system to become involved. Alternatively, formal kinship care arrangements may change to a private arrangement at a later point in time. Our recommendations take into account the variation in and fluidity of families' caregiving arrangements.

Elements of the Kinship Care Support and Service System

This Kinship Care Support and Service System is built on principles and components.

The principles are overarching values to guide decision making. These principles are interrelated, and they work together in a dynamic way. We present them in sequential order, but this order is not intended to subordinate principles. Each is critical and must be operationalized in any coherent set of effective policies, programs, practices, services, and supports for kinship families.

The principles lay the foundation for the key components of a kinship care service-delivery system. Like the principles, each component is essential to an optimal system that serves both informal and formal kinship families. Subcomponents provide greater detail regarding the full and effective implementation of the component to which they relate.

Guiding principles for the optimal system

Policies, programs, practices, services and supports for kinship families should be developed and implemented in ways that are consistent with the following principles. They must:

1. Recognize that families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to their communities.
2. Recognize the strengths and resilience of kinship families.
3. Recognize the importance of children's continued connections with their birth parents, siblings, and extended family members when they are placed with kin either informally or formally.
4. Actively engage kinship families, including children, in a partnership to develop and implement services, evaluate outcomes, and improve the quality of programs designed to support kinship families.
5. Ensure that services and supports are provided in a way that does not stigmatize kinship families and the child or youth in their care.
6. Ensure that policies are developed and services and supports are provided in a way that is cognizant of and honors the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious or spiritual backgrounds of kinship families and that respects differences in sexual orientation.
7. Support kin who informally care for children so that children do not have to enter the formal child welfare system.
8. Support placing children with kin—both initially and when any subsequent placement is needed—provided that kin can provide a safe, nurturing environment for children. This includes placement with maternal and paternal relatives, and, whenever possible, placing all siblings together.

9. Ensure that all children in formal kinship care achieve permanency in a way that ensures stability, safety, and nurturance for the child or youth. Whenever possible, this should occur through reunification with birth parents or through placement with the kinship caregiver (through adoption or legal guardianship).
10. Ensure that services and supports are fair, responsive, and accountable to kinship families and children—whether they are caring for children informally or formally.

Components of the optimal system

An effective kinship care support and service system must have a number of core components in place to ensure that policies, programs, practices, services, and supports effectively respond to the needs of kinship families.

In the following table and discussion we group components into three categories: (1) those that apply to both informal and formal kinship care families; (2) additional components that are specific to informal kinship care; and (3) additional components that are specific to formal kinship care.

As noted above, the term “kinship caregivers” refers here to the adults who provide care, nurturing, and protection for children. The term “kinship families” refers to the entire family constellation, including the children and youth in kinship families.

The Kinship Care Support and Service System		
KEY COMPONENTS	ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS	ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS
Informal and formal kinship care	Informal kinship care	Formal kinship care
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote and support a culture that values kinship care for children and youth. 2. Actively engage kinship families, including children, in planning and developing services and supports, evaluating outcomes, and improving the quality of programs that serve kinship families. 3. Involve the community in supporting kinship families. 4. Ensure that services and supports are provided in culturally competent ways. 5. Provide services and supports for kinship families. 6. Coordinate services across systems. 7. Prepare youth to transition to adulthood with support from kin. 8. Educate families about the child welfare system. 9. Support kinship families' participation in advocacy. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Link informal kinship families with one another in ways that promote self-help, mutual support, and shared resources. 2. Develop policy options for informal kinship families that address legal and financial support issues. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify all potential kinship resources for children when they must enter foster care. 2. View permanency for children in the care of kin broadly. 3. Place children with kin who can care for, protect, teach, and nurture them and meet the individual needs of each child or youth. 4. Ensure that healthy connections with birth parents, siblings, and extended family are conserved. 5. Develop a relationship with kin that supports positive involvement with the child welfare agency. 6. Ensure that child welfare staff are well trained and supported in their work with kinship families. 7. Educate kin about the judicial system and educate the judicial system about kinship care. 8. Provide post-permanency services and supports to kin. 9. Develop policy options for formal kinship families that address key legal and financial support issues.

Discussion of components and subcomponents

In the following discussion, each of the components is briefly discussed. Subcomponents that are critical to its implementation are listed under the component (lettered A, B, and so on).

KEY COMPONENTS: Informal and formal kinship care

1. Promote and support a culture that values kinship care for children.

It is essential to raise awareness, enhance understanding, and create a culture that recognizes and supports the importance of families (including birth parents, siblings, and extended family) and the importance of community in the lives of children. It is critical that the broad culture recognizes the role of kin in providing children with the care, protection, and nurturance that they need, whether on a temporary or on a longer-term basis.

Key audiences must be assisted to understand the role of kin in children's lives and the service and support needs of kinship families. The audiences that need to be reached and the messages to be conveyed are the following:

- A. Communicate the values and benefits of kinship care to children, families, communities, and society at large.
- B. Understand and address the individualized and supportive, culturally competent, strength-based range of needs.
- C. Create and support organizational cultures that value and support kinship care.
- D. Engage and support collaboration with community and faith-based organizations and grassroots networks.
- E. Educate kinship caregivers as to availability and benefits of services.

2. Actively engage kinship families, including children, in planning and developing services and supports, evaluating outcomes, and improving the quality of programs that serve kinship families.

A key component is that kinship families, including children, play an active role in defining what they need and how they need services and supports to be provided, in evaluating the effectiveness of services and supports, and in guiding actions to improve the quality of programs that serve kinship families.

- A. Assessments about service needs and access to services include kinship families in an active role.

- B. Information about the ongoing needs of kinship families, their access to and use of services, and supports and their overall satisfaction level is collected and used to improve programs, policies, and practices.

3. Involve the community in supporting kinship families.

Recognizing that kinship families can be a resource to each other they also may need access to a coordinated array of community-based services and supports. Partnerships among community-based organizations, including faith-based organizations, should serve all families, including kinship families, and not stigmatize kinship families as “different.”

- A. Relationships with community organizations are developed and nurtured.
- B. The community—particularly community-based services and supports—is an active partner in supporting kinship families.
- C. Kinship families have timely access to necessary and appropriate services in the community.
- D. Child welfare, education, mental health, and substance abuse prevention and treatment agency leaders and managers have strong relationships, partnerships, and formal collaborations with community-based services and supports.

4. Ensure that services and supports are provided in culturally competent ways.

It is key that cultural competence and sensitivity guide the ways in which kinship families are engaged and services and supports are planned and delivered.

- A. Necessary and culturally appropriate services and supports are tailored to the specific needs of kinship families.
- B. Service providers are representative of the population they serve.
- C. Staff understands the importance of culturally appropriate services and supports for kinship families.
- D. Staff solicits the assistance of cultural community members to identify culture-specific resources.

5. Provide services and supports for kinship families.

Like all families, informal and formal kinship families have needs for services and supports. Individualized assessments of families’ needs for services and supports are essential because different families have different needs and families’ needs may change over time. At the same time, kinship families may need assistance in understanding and handling changing family dynamics as kin assume new parenting

roles for children and assume responsibilities that formerly were those of the child's birth parent.

- A. Services and supports are provided to kinship families to assist them with changing family dynamics as kin take on new roles and responsibilities within their families.
- B. The array of services and supports identified by kinship families is available.
- C. Services and supports for kinship families are accessible and promptly provided.
- D. The financial needs of kinship families are recognized and sources of funding to meet their needs are identified.
- E. Information about these services and supports is communicated to kinship families.
- F. Services are provided in the least intrusive manner possible.
- G. Training is provided to kinship caregivers on an ongoing basis in such areas as discipline, health issues, and education.

6. Coordinate services across systems.

All systems that serve kinship families need to develop a shared vision and a clear, coordinated agenda that defines the results to be achieved through working in partnership with kinship families. The agenda needs to state specifically how those results will be achieved. In addition to the child welfare system, other systems such as the education, health care, mental health, and substance abuse prevention and treatment systems need to recognize the needs of kinship families and work collaboratively together to ensure that the needs of kinship families are met.

- A. An open forum for dialog is established and supported among kinship families, schools, health care providers, mental health services providers, and other major service systems.
- B. Services are streamlined among programs so families do not need to continually repeat information about their situations and needs.
- C. Training is provided across systems on the strengths and needs of kinship families.

7. Prepare youth to make the transition to adulthood with support from kin.

Youth who live with kin, either formally or informally, must be prepared to make the transition to adulthood. Preparation for adulthood must begin early and incorporate long-term planning for youth in the form of "independent living skills." These skills are important for all youth, whether their living arrangements are with parents, kin,

unrelated foster parents, or other caregiving situations. As they enter adulthood, youth need a high school education (at minimum), higher education and/or vocational training that provides youth with employment skills, and the strong support of family or other caring adults.

- A. Kin are supported in accessing information, services, and supports to assist them in working with youth in their care around preparation for adulthood, particularly in the areas of education and employment-related skills.
- B. Youth in kinship families are provided information, services, and supports to prepare them for adulthood (including access to federally funded services, such as those provided under the Chafee program for youth in formal kinship care).
- C. Schools are provided with information about the supports that youth and kinship caregivers may need so that young people complete their education, without stigmatizing young people or their families.

8. Educate families about the child welfare system.

Kinship families need information about the child welfare system and the services and supports that it can provide. Informal kinship families may be distrustful of the child welfare system and may not feel that they can contact that system for services and supports. Formal kinship families, because of their direct relationship with child welfare systems, need to understand “how the system works.”

- A. Information is provided to informal kinship families about the child welfare system and the services and supports that are available to families.
- B. Formal kinship families are provided with clear information on how the child welfare system “works.”

9. Support kinship families’ participation in advocacy.

Kinship families have much to contribute at the advocacy level, and they need supports in enhancing and developing their skills and linking with larger advocacy agendas. Both kinship caregivers and children should be supported to participate actively as advocates on behalf of kinship families.

- A. Agencies provide kinship families with training and other supportive activities to assist them in advocating for the services and resources that they need.
- B. Kinship families provide information about the ongoing needs of their families and their satisfaction levels to improve programs, policies, and practices.
- C. Kinship families actively participate in activities that inform legislators and other policy makers about their service and support needs.

ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS: Informal kinship care

1. Link informal kinship families with one another in ways that promote self-help, mutual support, and shared resources.

Services should support kinship families' abilities to help themselves and rely upon one another.

- A. Agencies support capacity building among kinship families for self-support and mutual support.
- B. Kinship families can easily connect with one another to share information and provide support.

2. Develop policy options for informal kinship families that address key legal, service and financial support issues.

- A. Efforts are made to address the legal and financial needs of informal kinship families in such areas as: standby guardianship arrangements; changes in custody law to make it easier for kin to assume legal responsibility for children and consent to medical care, educational services, and other matters; possible changes in adoption law; and economic security issues, including possible changes in TANF, EITC, housing subsidies and supports, and other programs.
- B. Policy options are developed to support the transition of youth from informal kinship care to adulthood (such as, for example, developing supports equivalent to those offered to youth who age out of foster care).

ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS: Formal kinship care

1. Identify all potential kinship resources for children when they must enter the foster care system.

Potential kinship resources include maternal and paternal relatives (including adult siblings of younger children) and other individuals identified by the family or the community as resources for children who must enter the foster care system. Potential kinship care resources also include relatives who live in other states. These resources should be identified at the time that children enter care.

- A. Staff are trained and prepared to work with families to identify all potential placement resources when children must enter foster care or at any case planning review.
- B. Decision making regarding children's placements integrates an identification and a safety assessment of all potential resources.

2. View permanency for children in the care of kin broadly.

Permanency planning for children placed with kin should take into account the relationship between the child/youth and kin and actively engage kin in determining the optimal permanency plan for the child/youth—that is, whether the best plan is reunification with the child/youth's parent, continuing placement with kin, legal guardianship, adoption by kin or by another adult, or another permanency alternative.

- A. Kinship families' input is actively solicited and used in the child or youth's case plan and in planning for permanency for the child or youth.
- B. When reunification is not the plan for the child or youth, staff explore with kin their personal interests in serving as a permanent resource for the child or youth, respecting the views of kinship caregivers and exploring the resources that might be needed to support permanency with kin if the caregiver is interested in this plan.

3. Place children with kin who can care for, protect, teach, and nurture them and meet the individual needs of each child or youth.

The focus should be on the individual needs of the child or youth and on the ability of kin resources—whether maternal or paternal and whether within or outside the state—to meet those needs. Placement of children with kin should be based on an assessment of the kin's ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the child or youth. Licensing and approval issues should be considered in light of the child or youth's needs and the ability of kin to provide care, nurturing, and protection.

- A. Staff receives training and preparation for working in partnership with kinship caregivers and the children in their care to ensure that children's safety and well-being needs are met.
- B. Staff receives training and support to place children with kin who live in other states when those kin are assessed as able to provide children with the care, protection, and nurture that they need.
- C. Staff provides ongoing assistance, as dictated by the kinship families, to ensure that the individualized needs of children are met on an ongoing basis.
- D. Staff works closely with kin to develop alternative care arrangements for the child or youth when the current kinship arrangement cannot provide a safe and nurturing environment.

4. Ensure that healthy connections with birth parents, siblings, and extended family are conserved.

While children are in the care of kin, ongoing connections with their parents, siblings, and extended family should be maintained, if possible. Children may desire ongoing

contacts with their birth parents despite abandonment, abuse, or neglect. Healthy connections with the birth parents as well as with siblings (if they are not placed together) and with other members of the extended family should be maintained.

When children in kinship care are not reunified with their parents, they are likely to have an ongoing connection with their parents—physically or emotionally. These connections also need to be recognized and addressed. Likewise, when children leave foster care for adoption by a nonrelative, their ongoing connections with their parents, siblings, and kin should be acknowledged and supported.

- A. Agencies expect and support healthy relationships between kinship families and children's parents and support kin appropriately in this regard.
- B. Agencies support children's healthy relationships with their siblings by placing siblings together whenever appropriate and by supporting healthy contacts with siblings when children are not placed together with the same kin caregiver.
- C. Agencies expect and support children's ongoing connections with kin, as well as their parents and siblings, when they leave foster care for adoption by a nonrelative.

5. Develop a relationship with kin that supports positive involvement with the child welfare agency.

Child welfare agency staff must recognize the differences between kinship care and the care of children by unrelated foster parents while, at the same time, respecting and responding to the service and support needs of kinship families. Child welfare staff should acknowledge the professional and institutional bias that have undermined healthy, supportive relationships with families and develop effective ways of engaging with them.

- A. Responsibilities of, expectations for, and rights of kinship families are clear.
- B. Kinship caregivers are involved in decisions about obtaining services and supports through clearly established, consistent processes (including, for example, Family Group Decision Making).
- C. Kinship families' input is actively solicited for and used in the development of agency policy, programs, and practices.
- D. Training is provided to kinship caregivers, both to prepare them for working with the agency as formal kinship families and on an ongoing basis in such areas as advocacy skills, discipline, health issues, and education.
- E. The types and services needed by individual kinship caregivers and the child or youth in their care are assessed regularly, in the least intrusive manner, and are based on principles of family preservation.

- F. Responsibilities of, expectations for, and rights of the agency are clear.
- G. Communication with kinship families is honest, cordial, respectful, and direct. Staff fully discloses to kinship caregivers all known information about the child or youth's circumstances and the services and supports that are available.
- H. Staff have frequent and regular contacts with kinship caregivers and with the children in their care.

6. Ensure that child welfare staff is well trained and supported in their work with kinship families.

Child welfare staff must be well-trained and supported to provide appropriate services in appropriate ways to kinship families.

- A. All agency staff—including management, licensing and approval, training, and casework staff—are committed to partnering with kinship families.
- B. Staff are trained and prepared to work with kinship families.
- C. Staff receive appropriate and adequate support from the agency to partner with kinship families.

7. Educate kin about the judicial system and educate the judicial system about kinship care.

Kinship families need information about the juvenile and family court system—its role in decision making regarding children in the formal child welfare system, the rights of kin to be given notice and an opportunity to be heard in court proceedings, and other legal matters. Kinship families also need assistance in understanding the various aspects of the court system that may impact them (child welfare, juvenile justice, child support enforcement, and others) but which often operate very differently from one another. At the same time, juvenile and family court staff need information about kinship families and their needs.

- A. Staff provides kinship caregivers with information regarding the juvenile and family court system and their roles in different types of court proceedings involving children in their care.
- B. Staff supports kin in fulfilling their roles in connection with child welfare court proceedings.
- C. Staff provides information (including training programs whenever possible) to court staff—judges, CASA volunteers, GALs, and others.

8. Provide post-permanency services and supports to kin.

Whether kin assume custody, assume guardian status, or adopt children in their care, they may continue to need services and supports, including financial support and health-care coverage.

- A. The array of post-permanency services and supports needed by kinship families is available.
- B. Post-permanency services and supports for kinship families are accessible and promptly provided.
- C. Information about these services and supports is communicated to kinship families.

9. Develop policy options for formal kinship families that address key legal and financial support issues.

Policies need to be developed to meet the legal and financial needs of formal kinship families.

- A. Efforts are made to address the legal and financial needs of formal kinship families, particularly: the development and continuation of subsidized guardianship programs at both the federal and state levels, and the implementation of equitable financial supports for kinship families (that is, equivalent supports to those received by unrelated foster families).

Looking Forward

Casey Family Programs now turns to efforts to support the collaborative implementation—by kinship families, the child welfare system, other key child and family systems, and community-based agencies and other resources—of an optimal service delivery system for kinship care.

In 2005 Casey sponsored a Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Supporting Kinship Care. Using a rapid-change methodology to share knowledge, strategies, challenges and successes, the Collaborative brought together teams from twenty-six state, county, and tribal child welfare agencies to improve the way they identify, support and serve kinship caregivers. Casey will publish a full report in 2006 to share with child welfare practitioners this collaborative's successful strategies and tools, and indicators of system improvement.

Glossary of Terms

Cultural competence is defined as “a set of cultural behaviors and attitudes integrated into the practice methods of a system, agency, or its professionals that enables them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.” (*Administration on Aging [January 2001]. Achieving cultural competence: A guidebook for providers of services to older Americans and their families.* <http://www.aoa.gov/prof/adddiv/cultural/CCguidebook.pdf>)

Cultural competence emphasizes the idea of *effectively operating* in different cultural contexts. Building cultural competence is a process in which people learn as they go. It involves continual training and collaboration with communities to yield continuous improvement.

Cultural responsiveness and timely services are individual, family, and community-based services that carefully consider the child/ or youth’s cultural identity, sexual orientation, past traumas, and the historical context of his or her family. Culturally responsive and timely services address:

- Cultural competence and diversity
- Mitigation of disproportionality
- System accountability and timeliness
- Post-permanency services

Discrimination. To make distinctions on the basis of preference or prejudice. It involves any situation in which a group or individual is treated differently and sometimes unfairly, based on something other than individual reason—usually their membership in a socially distinct group or category. Such categories would include race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, or disability.

Disproportionality encompasses both over-representation of children of color in the out-of-home care system and disparity in outcomes for children of color. In the child welfare system, children of color are represented at a higher ratio than other racial or ethnic groups, and they experience less positive service outcomes.

Kinship caregiver. An adult who provides care, nurturing, and protection for children and youth.

Kinship family. The entire constellation of the family, including adults, youth, and children.

Institutional racism. When race prejudice and power are embedded into the culture of an organization and are manifested through decision and bias that lead to negative outcomes for individuals of color.

Safety assessment. A safety assessment is used to determine when a child is safe. It is based on an analysis of all available information and the conclusion that the child in his or her current living arrangement is not in immediate danger of moderate or serious harm and no safety interventions are necessary. (Source: Guidelines for a Model System of Protective Services for Abused and Neglected Children and their Families, 1999 National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, an affiliate of Association of Public Human Service Administrators).

Supports and services. Among the services and supports that kinship families, like all families, may need are: information and referral, financial, physical and mental health, housing, social support (including self-help and support groups for adults, youth, and children), emotional support (including counseling for all members of kinship families), legal services, educational services (including assistance in working with the school system, navigating the special education system and Individual Education Plan development and implementation, and an understanding of their rights in connection with the educational system), respite care, recreation, transportation, and other tangible supports (such as furniture and clothing for children).

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