



## How are kinship navigator programs developed and funded?

[Numerous studies](#) have established the benefits of kinship care, and children who must be removed from their homes should be placed with kin caregivers whenever possible.<sup>1</sup> To prioritize and support kinship placements, child welfare agencies should: [advance a kin-first culture](#); provide supports for children, their parents, and caregivers; and identify and connect families to community-based supports. Kin caregivers often assume the role of caregiver abruptly and unexpectedly, and [poverty rates among kin caregivers](#) are almost twice the U.S. average. As a result, they need access to a wide range of timely tangible and intangible supports. Kinship navigator programs play a key role in providing these supports.

As a companion to [What are kinship navigator programs?](#), this strategy brief highlights program development recommendations shared by kinship navigator program experts in **Colorado, Ohio, Montana, and Washington**, and describes some of the existing funding streams.<sup>2</sup>

### Program development and implementation

The first step in developing a kinship navigator program is deciding on or developing a program model. The Children's Bureau's [synthesis of lessons learned](#) from seven kinship navigator program grantees is a helpful resource, as is the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). Although the programs listed in the clearinghouse tend to be attached to a specific state for the purpose of evaluation,



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they are not intended to be state-specific and have comprehensive program manuals and other materials that can be applied in other jurisdictions.

## Partner with individuals with lived expertise

The [federal legislation regarding kinship navigator programs](#) calls for people with lived experience and advocates to be included in program design and implementation. In **Colorado**, kin caregivers provided feedback on the kinship needs assessment through interviews and focus groups. When conducting these focus groups, Colorado realized that kin caregivers needed more social support, so a social support network piece got added to the program. Advisory councils should include broad representation, including kin caregivers and adults who grew up in kinship care.

## Define program parameters

Agencies need to decide which kinship families the navigator program ought to serve (formal, informal, or both), what services will be provided, how families will be recruited, how to train kinship navigators, and how to best structure and implement the program (for example, whether the program is situated inside a state agency or administered by a community partner). **Colorado's** program, an enhancement of its Title IV-E Waiver kinship supports intervention, thus far has served only families involved in the child welfare system and is now exploring how to serve other families, as well. The vast majority of families served through **Washington's** program are not involved with child welfare, and **Ohio's** program is unique in that it also serves kinship families after they have adopted the child.

## Develop program materials

Creating a program manual not only helps communicate the policies and procedures to staff and volunteers, but it also codifies the program in preparation for possible submission to the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, and for use and adaptation in other jurisdictions. **Colorado's** Kinconnected Kinship Navigator [program manual](#) provides details on procedures and includes tools and resources, such as a kinship supports needs assessment. In **Nevada**, Foster Kinship's [program manual](#) includes a program overview, a description of the model, staffing information, and resources. The [program manual](#) for **OhioKAN** (Kinship and Adoption Navigator) includes information on the program's core components, theory of change, community partnerships, procedures for service delivery, staffing resources, and core implementation supports. In addition to the program manual, Ohio's kinship navigators have access to an [internal information hub](#) with over 9,000 resources throughout the state, searchable by location. The hub includes a place for navigators to review the resources and write notes about their experiences interacting with the resource.

## Meet the unique needs of informal caregivers

Programs that serve kin caregivers have large gaps to fill, given the limited supports available and the urgent nature of most placements. Lynn Urvina, a kin caregiver and advocate in Washington, noted that for families that choose not to become formal, licensed caregivers, the challenges in navigating support may be even greater. "There's such inequity between the families that have foster licenses and the reimbursement rates they

Before they are connected to a navigator, kinship caregivers will tell you how they struggle connecting to resources and getting the emotional support that they need. But once connected to a navigator, it's like magic. It's like 'I need something. I'm going to call Sarah.' It's that simple.

— GEENE DELAPLANE,

KINSHIP CARE AND GUARDIANSHIP PROGRAM MANAGER, WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

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receive and the lower rates that the kinship families receive,” she said. “Navigators try to plug kin families into other resources. If a kid walks into a formal foster home, they automatically receive three or four times as much support as if they walked through the door to Grandma who already loves them, cares for them, and keeps them connected to their family and culture.” Kinship navigator programs can address material needs (such as clothing and diapers) and provide valuable assistance providing emotional and social support and navigating legal, medical, and educational issues, although it’s important to acknowledge that the programs are very unlikely to entirely fill the gaps created through inequities at the policy or systems level.

## Keep families at the center

Instead of predetermining the supports a kinship family might need, families’ strengths and needs should be at the center of all kinship navigator programs. In addition to providing individualized needs assessments and services, **Colorado’s** kinship care program provides facilitated family engagement meetings and the development of a genogram for each kinship caregiver. **OhioKAN** is a flexible and adaptive kinship navigator program providing individualized advocacy rather than a diagnostic or therapeutic intervention. In addition to providing direct services to families, OhioKAN provides services to communities, using a structure of regional advisory councils. One regional advisory council started five support groups in response to an expressed community need.

## Hire kinship navigators who reflect the population they will serve

Kinship navigator programs should be intentional in hiring navigators whose racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds reflect the kin caregivers with whom they work. In **Ohio**, to ensure equal access to all candidates, the kinship navigator job description indicates that a college degree is preferred but not required. **Washington’s** job description includes “lived experiences as a kinship caregiver or experience serving and partnering with kinship caregivers” as part of the recommended job description. “Caregivers (often) don’t have formal custody and they’re worried about people pulling the rug under them and losing the safety of those kids,” said Shelly Willis, executive director of Family Education and Support Services. “It is really important to know that you’re working with someone you can trust who looks like you and who has lived through an experience like you.”

## Program evaluation

Program evaluation is a key component when developing a kinship navigator program. Planning for evaluation should begin in the early stages of program development and should be centered on equity. Programs aiming for inclusion in the Prevention Services Clearinghouse need to conduct a rigorous evaluation. In May 2023, the federal Administration for Children and Families released a [request for applications](#) inviting organizations that provide prevention services (including kinship navigator programs) to participate in three-year evaluation partnerships. Grant recipients will be supported in designing and implementing a randomized controlled

We have guidelines, not scripts. We want people to be interacting and reacting to what the family needs rather than having a pre-set, predetermined vision for where that family is going to with their case services.

— JULIA DONOVAN,  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR, OHIOKAN

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trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental evaluation that meets the criteria for moderate or high research support in the Prevention Services Clearinghouse.

Determining how to conduct an ethical RCT can be challenging, given that it is undesirable to withhold services from families that could benefit from them.

**Colorado** overcame this challenge by providing services as usual to all families and then providing additional strategies and interventions (such as regular face-to-face contact with kinship caregivers) to the treatment group. For small states, it can be difficult to have a sufficient sample size for an RCT. **Montana** and **Wyoming** are partnering on their evaluation to engage a sufficient number of families.

Although the Prevention Services Clearinghouse does not require evaluation data be disaggregated by race and ethnicity, programs nevertheless should [examine disaggregated outcomes](#) to ensure that children and families from all backgrounds are being equitably served. In an effort to make its program and evaluation culturally responsive and equitable, **Ohio** uses its Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Access Framework to guide program design at all levels, including details such as the phrasing of question in the needs assessment. For example, instead of asking questions such as, “Do you feel confident in caring for your children?” which puts the onus on the family to resolve their needs when they might not have the resources to do so, the needs assessment includes questions such as, “Do you have what you need within the system?”

## Advocacy and communication

Effective advocacy and communication are necessary for building and maintaining support and for ensuring that families that could benefit from the program are aware of it.

### Engage partners and program champions

Strong relationships between a governor’s office, community partners, the child protection agency, and legislative bodies are key to securing and sustaining funding. Collaboration among numerous partners — such as counties, the child welfare system, agencies on aging, community partners, and the evaluation team — helps ensure that the kinship navigator program is

## RALLYING COMMUNITY SUPPORT THROUGH A KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM IN OHIO

OhioKAN’s kinship navigator program in Dayton was able to rally community resources to support one family. The family had taken in a group of siblings, one of whom used a motorized wheelchair. The family moved into a new home to accommodate the wheelchair but cigarette smokers had inhabited the house previously. The home therefore needed numerous remediations, including new carpeting at an estimated cost of \$7,000. The kinship navigator reached out to a network of local churches, which donated money, and worked with a local hardware store to reduce the expense of the carpeting. Members of a church assisted in the installation of the carpeting. In addition to having a healthier home, the kin caregivers are now connected to community members — a network of people the family can rely on for support.

supported and integrated. Kinship navigator program staff should include someone with state and county service systems experience and who has a deep understanding of the supports available for families.

In **Montana**, a partnership with Montana State University provides opportunities for kin caregiver trainings and information dissemination. **Ohio** places a heavy emphasis on equity in advocacy. “We intentionally advocate alongside people of color and others marginalized by systems,” said Julia Donovan, program director of OhioKAN. “Our equity framework is embedded into all of our work. There is a multitude of reasons why young people are living with kin, and we try to be as diverse as those situations.”

### Be strategic about program outreach and communication

It is helpful to consider program communication from the start. Effective communication leads to better access. In addition to planning for communication



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to kinship families, it is important to develop good communication and referral pathways so navigators are connected with families that need services. The name of the program is one component of program communication that provides a first impression. Terms such as “grandparents” exclude other family members who are kin caregivers, such as aunts and uncles. “When you say, ‘Grandparents Raising Grandchildren,’ already people are disqualifying themselves completely,” said Heidi Lester, program manager of the **Montana** Kinship Navigator Program.

## Maintain program visibility and celebrate successes

Program visibility helps ensure continued funding streams and program support. In **Washington**, a governor’s proclamation declared the third Wednesday of each May to be Kinship Caregivers Day; a partner organization convenes an annual advocacy day during which legislators and kinship caregivers hear directly from each another; and the Seattle Mariners baseball team hosts an annual “We Are Family Day” to celebrate foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Rosalyn Alber, kinship and lifespan respite program manager for the Aging and Long-Term Support Administration of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, emphasized the importance of hearing from kin caregivers themselves. “Having an opportunity for caregivers’ voices to be heard and their stories to be told is key,” she said. “Hearing firsthand from the people who are experiencing these circumstances is so much more impactful and meaningful than hearing from a second or third party.”

## BUILDING RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Child Trends created a resource, [Strategies to Build Evidence for Kinship Navigator Programs under the Family First Act](#), which explores common challenges in evaluating kinship navigator programs and potential solutions to address them. The Urban Institute and Child Trends released a guide, [How to Develop a Theory of Change and Logic Model for Your Kinship Navigator Program](#), which can be helpful both for designing programs and setting the stage for program evaluation.

## Funding

A patchwork of federal, state, and local sources provide funding for kinship navigator programs.

### Federal funding streams

The primary source of federal funding for kinship navigator programs comes through the [MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program](#).

This non-competitive designated funding, which does not require a match, helps states, territories, and tribes develop programs that will meet the federal definition and the evidence standard for kinship navigator programs for Title IV-E funding (described below). A total of [\\$20 million is available](#) annually to develop, enhance, and evaluate kinship navigator programs (with a minimum grant award of \$200,000 to each state and \$25,000 to each tribe), although Congress

There are kinship families out there whether you know about it or not. They’re everywhere, and they need support, and they need to not be judged because something went a little sideways in their family. Drop the judgment. Just find them resources and see what you can do to help the kids.

— LYNN URVINA,  
KINSHIP CAREGIVER AND ADVOCATE, WASHINGTON

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has to approve the funding every year. Nearly \$2.8 million of this amount is for the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse to support evaluation and technical assistance.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 provides a dedicated [Title IV-E funding stream](#) for kinship navigator programs that meet requirements put forth in [section 427\(a\)\(1\)](#) of the Social Security Act. Jurisdictions are able to receive ongoing federal reimbursement for up to 50% of their expenditures to provide kinship navigator programs. To take advantage of this ongoing federal funding, agencies must use kinship navigator programs that meet evidence-based requirements of promising, supported, or well-supported practices as defined by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. In federal fiscal year 2021, eight states with kinship navigator program plans received Title IV-E funds (due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the requirement that funded programs be listed on the Clearinghouse was waived temporarily).<sup>4</sup> [Funding totaled nearly \\$3.4 million and supported 3,286 families.](#) The Congressional Budget Office anticipates [increases in direct spending](#) on Title IV-E payments for evidence-based kinship navigator programs through 2027.

States with unobligated [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#) (TANF) funding can use it to support kinship navigator programs, given that one of the main purposes of the TANF benefit is to “provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.” Jurisdictions also have the option to fund kinship navigator programs through [Social Services Block Grants](#) or through the [National Family Caregiver Support Program](#).



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## State and local approaches to funding

Jurisdictions also can use state and local funding sources, including general reserve funds. The kinship navigator program in **Washington**, which began in 2004 through legislation, is funded mostly through the state budget. **OhioKAN** is funded primarily by state general revenue and Title IV-B kinship navigator funds, and recently received Title IV-E reimbursement under the Consolidated Appropriations Act. Medicaid, TANF, and other local funds may be a source of direct support to families and OhioKAN works to connect caregivers to these resources based on eligibility.

It can be challenging to obtain sufficient funding to serve kin caregivers who may not qualify for certain funding streams. “Families come in all shapes and sizes,” said Alber, of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. “Resources are siloed. You might have a family that falls between some of these silos because of where the funding streams come from. We need to be broader in our perspectives about resources that are available to support those families.”

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Kin may be defined as relatives by blood or marriage, as well as other people who are close to the child and family and whom the child or family views as “chosen family”, also known as [fictive kin](#).
- 2 This brief is based on interviews with:
  - Lauren Alessi, Research Associate and Associate Director, Social Work Research Center, Colorado State University School of Social Work; Jeannie Berzinskas, Kinship Care Program Administrator, Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Child Welfare; Greg Forehand, Research Associate, Human Services Research Institute; and Marc Winokur, Senior Research Scientist and Director, Social Work Research Center, Colorado State University School of Social Work. (February 13, 2023)
  - Rosalyn Alber, Kinship and Lifespan Respite Program Manager, Aging and Long-Term Support Administration, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services; Geene Delaplane, Kinship Care and Guardianship Program Manager, Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families; Amanda Krotke, Fidelity Analyst, Aging and Long-Term Support Administration, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services; Laurie Lippold, Director of Public Policy, Partners for Our Children; and Shrounda Selivanoff, Director of Public Policy, Children’s Home Society of Washington. (February 27, 2023)
  - Lisa Curry, Research Manager, JG Research & Evaluation, and Heidi Lester, Program Manager, Montana Kinship Navigator Program. (March 10, 2023)
  - Julia Donovan, Program Director, OhioKAN, and Veronica Burroughs, Project Manager, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (March 30, 2023)
  - Lynn Urvina, Kinship Caregiver and Advocate, and Shelly Willis, Executive Director, Family Education and Support Services. (March 20, 2023)
- 3 The Administration for Children and Families’ [annual guidance to state, tribal, and territorial agencies](#) provides more information for agencies receiving Title IV-B, Subpart 2 funding to support the development, enhancement, and evaluation of kinship navigator programs.
- 4 Between April 1, 2020, and September 30, 2021, [temporary flexibilities](#) were granted to Title IV-E agencies providing kinship navigator programs, including lifting the requirement that Title IV-E agencies provide match funds, waiving the requirement that programs meet evidence standards on the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, and permitting agencies to provide [short-term supports](#) to kinship families.

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