



STRATEGY BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

## What are **kinship navigator programs?**

[More than 2.6 million children](#) in the U.S. are being raised by their grandparents or other kin,<sup>1</sup> either formally through the child welfare system or informally through private family arrangements. When kin caregivers take on this responsibility, they often receive little to no financial support or advice regarding how to navigate the systems that may help them meet the needs of the children in their care. While some child protection agencies are shifting toward a [kin-first culture and practice](#) that prioritizes placement with and support for kin caregivers, many kin caregivers remain overlooked. [Kinship navigator programs](#) help fill those gaps by providing both formal and informal kin caregivers with information, education, and referrals to a wide range of services and supports. The navigator's goal is to maximize the caregivers' ability to provide safety and stability and, if appropriate, permanency for the children placed in their home.

This brief explains the need for kinship navigator programs, describes their essential elements, and provides jurisdictional examples (including outcomes). For information regarding developing and funding kinship navigator programs, see the companion brief: [How have some states developed and funded kinship navigator programs?](#)<sup>2</sup>



# What are kinship navigator programs?

## Need for kinship navigator programs

Unlike resource parents, kin caregivers usually step in to care for children urgently, with little notice or preparation. Resource parents often have time to prepare to take in children; they have access to parenting classes, child care, clothing, and a free lunch program. In addition, supports such as bicycles, extracurricular activities, and YMCA memberships often are provided to children in formal foster care but rarely to children in informal care. Many kin caregivers are older and already have downsized — they may have a smaller car, live in a retirement community, or reside in a house that doesn't have space for children. Kin caregivers often receive children without knowing about their medical or trauma history; sometimes they take in children they didn't even know existed until a crisis brings them to their door. "Kin caregivers are more likely to be isolated," said Shelly Willis, executive director of Family Education and Support Services in Washington state. "Their friends don't have kids. Their friends may be out golfing, traveling, or enjoying retirement. It's a very different world for relative caregivers in terms of respite and support."

Like all children in out-of-home care, those placed with kin are entitled to resources and supports that help protect their safety, promote their well-being, and facilitate permanency, ideally through safe reunification with their family.

## Essential elements

Kinship navigator programs offer information, referral, and follow-up services to kin caregivers to connect them with benefits and services that they or the children need. For example, kinship navigators can help caregivers apply for public benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),

[Grandfamilies.org](https://www.grandfamilies.org) offers a [kinship navigator webpage](#) that includes strategies, information on federal policy funding, and jurisdictional examples, including a [tip sheet](#) for the development of kinship navigator programs.

and Medicaid coverage for the child or children. Kinship navigator programs also help agencies and providers tune into the needs of families headed by relatives and provide education about the systems they must navigate for support. In some cases, kinship navigators assume multiple roles. Kinship navigators in [Allegheny County, Pa.](#), for example, assist in crisis family placements as well as family finding. While some kinship navigator programs are available for all kin caregiver families, others are only for caregivers of children who have child welfare agency involvement.

Kinship navigator programs assist kin caregivers in learning about, accessing, and using programs and services, both to meet the needs of the children they are raising and their own needs as caregivers. They also promote effective partnerships among public and private agencies to ensure kin caregiver families are served effectively. To receive federal funding under the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, kinship navigator programs must be rated as promising, supported, or well-supported on the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). Kinship navigator [program activities that the Children's Bureau has approved](#) include:

- Collaboration with other state and local agencies that coordinate services or provide information and referral services (including 2-1-1 or 3-1-1).

For a lot of kin caregivers, hope is in short supply. Part of our job is to instill that hope.

— HEIDI LESTER,

PROGRAM MANAGER, MONTANA KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

# What are kinship navigator programs?

- Inclusion of people with lived experience (kin caregivers, youth raised by kin caregivers), pertinent government agencies, and community-based or faith-based organizations in the design and implementation of programs.
- Establishment of information and referral systems that connect kin caregivers, support group facilitators, and service providers to each other, providing training, legal assistance, and information on eligibility and enrollment for public benefits.
- Outreach to kin caregiver families through websites, guides, and other materials.
- Establishment of partnerships between public and private agencies, such as community-based or faith-based organizations, schools, and pertinent government agencies, to increase knowledge of the needs of kin caregiver families and to promote better services.

Research shows that kin caregivers find [kinship navigator programs to be helpful both for themselves and for the children in their care](#), providing information, resources, and mutual support and decreasing isolation. [Satisfaction among kin caregivers](#) participating in such programs is high.

## Jurisdictional examples and outcomes

[Most states operate kinship navigator programs](#). As of May 2023, four programs have been rated on the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse as promising

or supported by research evidence, and five programs have been rated on the California Evidence-based Clearinghouse as promising or supported by research evidence.<sup>3</sup> Additional programs are under review. Although most programs listed on the clearinghouses are attached to a particular state, they are not intended to be state-specific programs. Information about the programs (particularly information provided in program manuals) can be used to support program implementation and operation beyond the jurisdiction in which the program was first developed. Some jurisdictional examples of longstanding, comprehensive kinship navigator programs include:

### Arizona

[Arizona Kinship Support Services](#), a program of Arizona's Children's Association, began as a Children's Bureau discretionary grant and is rated on the Title IV-E Prevention Service Clearinghouse as [supported by research evidence](#). Offering voluntary services to both formal and informal kin caregivers, the program provides: advocacy; education; information and referrals (including information on legal resources); assistance in completing forms related to school, medical services, and benefits; and support groups. A [program implementation manual](#) describes: required staffing and training; core program components, including screening and intake, kinship navigation services, other family support services, and recommendations on service duration and intensity; and guidelines for fidelity monitoring and data management protocols. A quasi-experimental study

The kinship navigator program is designed to support kinship caregivers, but it also supports children immensely. When you have a kinship caregiver who is full of resentment, it puts a child in harm's way. Kinship caregiver support groups are a recognition and an understanding that this is really hard work. And when a community invests in kinship caregivers, it tells them that they're valued and understood.

— SHROUNDIA SELIVANOFF,  
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC POLICY, CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

# What are kinship navigator programs?

found that children whose families received program services were [more likely to be placed in kinship care and more likely to exit to permanency](#), when compared to children whose families received standard Arizona Department of Child Safety services,

## Colorado

With origins as a Title IV-E Waiver demonstration project, the [Colorado Kinconnected Navigator Program](#) (rated as [promising](#) by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse) is for kin caregivers who are taking care of children with an open child welfare case (court involvement is not required). In addition to conducting a needs assessment and providing tangible and intangible kinship supports, the program provides family search and engagement activities, and facilitated family engagement meetings. The [program manual](#) details the services provided and data collection procedures. A randomized controlled trial found that children whose families participated in the Colorado Kinconnected Navigator Program experienced [greater placement stability and were more likely to reunify with their parents](#), when compared to similarly situated children whose families did not participate in the program.

## Florida

The [Children's Home Network-Kinship Navigator](#) program (rated as [supported by research](#) evidence by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse) provides services to both formal and informal caregivers. Program services include peer-to-peer support (hiring grandparents, other relatives, and other kin caregivers who have lived experience and can mentor other kin caregivers) and an interdisciplinary team approach to solving complex problems. The program utilizes an array of standardized assessments to identify and address family and developmental needs, stress, health, and well-being. It incorporates a wraparound model and family-driven approach that includes partnerships with key community members to support and strengthen kin care arrangements. A randomized controlled trial demonstrated that children whose caregivers received services through this kinship navigator program were less likely to experience maltreatment and more likely to live with a relative, when compared to children whose caregivers received usual care.<sup>4</sup>

## Nevada

The [Foster Kinship Navigator Program](#) (rated as [promising](#) by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse) focuses on legal supports, financial stability, connections to resources, and caregiver emotional support. All kin caregivers (formal and informal) have access to a helpline, an online resource locator, an intake assessment, community referrals, educational classes, family events, and online and in-person support groups. Kin caregivers who have demonstrated need are eligible to participate in case management with a family advocate. The program model provides information on staffing, assessment, and case management. The program has demonstrated [improved placement stability](#) for children who live in kinship caregiver placements.

## Ohio

[OhioKAN \(Kinship and Adoption Navigator\)](#) is a program of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services that is administered by a statewide nonprofit organization.<sup>5</sup> OhioKAN serves formal and informal kin caregivers as well as post-adoptive families through 10 regional offices. After conducting an initial conversation and program overview with kin caregivers, OhioKAN staff identify resources specific to the family's needs (utilizing an [information hub](#) with over 9,000 resources), develop a personalized resource plan, and follow-up with the family over time. The extensive [program manual](#) describes core program components, the theory of change, how the program partners with the community (including OhioKAN's [inclusion, diversity, equity, and access framework](#)), staffing structures, steps in the delivery of services, and information on how to successfully implement and monitor the program. An [evaluation](#) (designed for review by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse) is in progress.

## Pennsylvania

The [Kinship Caregiver Engagement and Support Program](#), provided by A Second Chance, Inc. (a private kinship foster care agency) is rated as [promising](#) by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse. The program serves kin caregivers of children who are involved in the child welfare system, providing intensive case management, concrete supports, and education



# What are kinship navigator programs?

— including continued supports after permanency has been attained. A quasi-experimental study showed that the program resulted in higher rates of permanent legal custodianship (legal guardianship) for program

participants; its success with African American families in particular could help reduce racial disparities in permanency outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

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 Delaplaine, 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 Not all programs on the two clearinghouses are still active.
- 4 Littlewood, K., Cooper, L., & Pandey, A. (2020). Safety and placement stability for the Children’s Home Network kinship navigator program. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 106.
- 5 Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/Protect OHIO, which was funded by a Title IV-E waiver, is rated as promising on both the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) and the [California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse](#).
- 6 Lee, D. H. J., Huerta, C., & Farmer, E. M. Z. (2021). Kinship navigation: Facilitating permanency and equity for youth in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 131.

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