



Prioritizing kinship placements starts with child protection agencies [establishing a kin-first philosophy](#), underscored in written policies and reflected in all aspects of practice. A kin-first culture means a child's first — and hopefully only — placement is with kin. It also means prioritizing the licensing of kinship caregivers whenever possible and providing them with the supports, such as [kinship navigators](#).

Kinship caregivers face unique challenges, and often there is a significant disparity between the resources provided to traditional foster parents and what kinship caregivers receive, which decreases both the availability of kinship families and their ability to safely and successfully raise the children in their care.<sup>1</sup> [Federal regulations](#), in effect since November 27, 2023, now allow states to **simplify the process for kinship caregivers to become licensed or approved foster care providers**. They also require that states provide licensed or approved kinship caregivers the same levels of financial support that a traditional foster family would receive. Adopting simplified licensing requirements for kinship caregivers has the potential to significantly increase the services and financial resources available to families.

“Kinship caregivers need access to the right resources to help their kids through their trauma. No matter what, just removing children is a trauma, on top of any adverse childhood experiences they bring with them. Training and support are essential to the long-term success of the placement.”

—Susan Langenfield, Resource and Adoptive Caregiver, New York

## Barriers to kinship care

[Kinship caregivers experience significantly more barriers](#) than traditional foster parents. Caregivers who elect to participate in non-kin foster care have the advantage of months or years of planning before a child is placed in their care. Kinship caregivers, however, often step into their role in emergency situations, without adequate time to prepare for a child's arrival. Caring for a relative child often means taking on unanticipated expenses, which can create new financial challenges or exacerbate existing ones. This is particularly true for grandparents, who are more likely to be on a fixed income. [One study](#) found that of the more than 2.5 million grandparents formally and informally caring for their grandchildren in the U.S., 25% had a disability and 20% lived in poverty. **Regardless of their willingness, many relatives cannot financially afford to care for their kin who are in the child welfare system without support.**

“Adding even one child to your home unexpectedly can rock your world. We must help kinship parents acknowledge it's OK to be stressed out, it's OK to feel overwhelmed. They need support, not just financially, but with their mental health as well.”

—Melissa Zimmerman, Birth Parent, Arizona

For states to receive federal Title IV-E reimbursement for foster care payments, caregivers must be licensed or approved. State laws require that all non-relative foster caregivers be licensed, but only 20 states and the District of Columbia [require kinship caregivers to be licensed](#). States can elect to use local funds to make foster care payments to non-licensed kinship caregivers, but whether and how much to pay them is at the state's discretion. Consequently, state licensing policies can affect dramatically the financial resources relatives have available to care for children.

Non-licensed relatives who rely on financial assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) typically receive less than half of the monthly support that licensed foster caregivers receive.<sup>2</sup>

Lower foster care payments for kinship caregivers could [negatively affect the stability of such placements](#). A [survey](#) of states' early implementation of the Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) showed that in one state, when GAP payments were increased to levels more equitable with foster care maintenance payments, the number of children placed with kin guardians increased. Non-licensed kinship caregivers, however, are not eligible to participate in Guardianship Assistance Programs.

A home study, which is mandatory before an out-of-home placement is granted, is a comprehensive evaluation that includes a safety inspection, financial review, background check, and interview. Historically, the home study requirement has presented challenges for many kinship caregivers seeking licensure. [Traditional home study requirements vary by state](#), but they typically include minimum standards such as “the home needs to be clean and in good repair” and “there have to be enough bedrooms” to sufficiently accommodate each child’s safety, privacy, and comfort. The suddenness of a kinship placement and limited financial resources may create barriers for some kinship families to meet certain home study standards. The majority of these barriers are not related to safety, however. One research study noted that a lack of adequate space was a barrier for some relatives when the child protection agency required that each child has an individual bedroom.<sup>3</sup>

A lack of communication between child welfare staff and relatives about the home study process is another common barrier. [Licensure options](#) often are not well explained, and potential kinship caregivers may not know to ask for the additional supports that come with licensure. Failing the home study due to strict licensing standards and inadequate information places relatives at a disadvantage and reduces the positive effects associated with kinship care for children.

## Kin-first home study and licensure practices

Fortunately, states have significant latitude in determining their foster care licensing standards. As long as licensing standards are consistent with nationally recognized safety and well-being standards (for example, child safety and sanitation recommendations), the federal government does not require states to adhere to any particular guidelines. In addition, [federal regulation](#) now allows and encourages states to create separate licensing or approval standards for kinship foster family homes. Implementing this new regulation will make it easier for kin-first agencies to honor their commitment to license families whenever possible, rather than be forced to rule them out.<sup>4</sup>

The regulation gives states discretion in [defining relatives and/or kin](#) for the purposes of the Title IV-E program.<sup>5</sup> The rule also encourages states to limit their standards only to federal requirements, including a safety-related background check, and align with “recommended standards of national organizations.”

States are allowed to vary significantly the licensing and home study standards for kinship caregivers versus traditional foster families. A study examining the effects of foster care licensing standards on kinship caregivers in the U.S. highlights a number of standards that are non-safety related and states could waive to facilitate more timely licensure. These include owning a vehicle, paying for outside health and safety inspections, sleeping arrangements, and proximate location to certain facilities.<sup>6</sup>

“Many kinship caregivers have past records that can, unfortunately, prevent them from being licensed to care for their grandchildren. While safety is important, it is also necessary to recognize that people can grow and change—who they are in their 20s is not the same as who they are in their 60s.”

—Molly Clore, Resource Caregiver, Florida

## Strategies for expediting kinship care approval

[A number of child welfare jurisdictions](#) already have begun implementing changes to their licensing and approval process for kinship caregivers in response to the federal rules, which conceivably allow for most or even all kinship caregivers to be approved within a single day — if more attention can be given to fingerprinting practices and processes for evaluating background checks.<sup>7</sup>

Timely fingerprinting is one of the most significant barriers to getting kinship caregivers licensed quickly. Some agencies are employing the following strategies to address the lag:

- Community police stations can be intimidating. As an alternative, **offer convenient community-based options** in safe locations with ample parking and night/weekend hours.
- Mobile units can **allow fingerprinting to be done in the caregiver's home** on the initial visit. This can be particularly helpful in rural areas. If caregivers frequently come into the office, consider having a fingerprinting mechanism available there.
- **Programs that allow jurisdictions direct access to national crime information systems**, including the Tribal Access Program, can help reduce delays in receiving results.

Background checks, especially across state lines, have been another barrier to timely approval. The advocacy organization Grandfamilies.org recommends that child protection agencies use readily available templates and forms for evaluations, denials, and appeals. Agencies may wish to expand staff hours dedicated to reviewing results and conducting daily decision meetings to ensure families do not have to wait for approvals. Neighboring states can take steps to minimize barriers for out-of-state registry checks, such as eliminating requirements for notarized and witness signatures, and fees. Grandfamilies.org also recommends that states accept electronic requests and allow official agency emails to serve as proof of identity and authority.

The examples<sup>8</sup> below highlight ways that three states are advancing kinship caregiver licensing:

**Michigan.** The state has provided unlicensed kinship caregivers the same level of support as licensed foster families since 2019. Licensure had been optional during that period, which was prior to implementation of the new federal rule. As a result, only 11% of kinship caregivers had been licensed. Since March 2024, however, an approval process is required for all new kinship caregivers. Although legacy caregivers are exempt, the state is hoping to increase its percentage of licensed/approved kinship caregivers by incentivizing families to complete the fingerprint requirement with a one-time payment of \$300. In partnership with Casey Family Programs, the state also hosted an event for families where fingerprinting was available.

**Oklahoma.** The Department of Human Services is consulting with legal experts to understand which changes to kinship care licensure and home study must be made through statute versus additions to administrative code. For example, pre-service training is required for all foster care providers, but the details of this training are not prescribed. The department therefore was able to define two types, kinship and traditional, each with different guidelines.

**Tennessee.** The Department of Children's Services already was paying kinship caregivers on par with non-relative foster families prior to the new federal regulation. By implementing the new regulations, however, the state has been able to approve kinship care families for the full rate much faster, usually within a few days. The agency also has experienced workload benefits, with the approval process now requiring six forms instead of 17, and one home visit instead of three. The state also is saving money by ending a contract formerly needed to conduct more extensive home studies for kinship families.

<sup>1</sup> Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include Molly Clore, Susan Lagenfield, and Melissa Zimmerman.

<sup>2</sup> Beltran, A. & Epstein, H. (2013). The standards to license kinship foster parents around the United States: Using research findings to effect change. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 16(5), 364-381.

<sup>3</sup> Riley-Behringer, M., & Cage, J. (2014). Barriers experienced by kinship and non-relative caregivers during the foster and adoptive parent licensure and home study process (LHSP). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 8(2), 1-40.

<sup>4</sup> Communication with Sharon McDaniel, A Second Chance Inc., Pennsylvania, on March 19, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Administration for Children and Families. (2023) [Final rule: Separate Licensing or Approval Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes](#). "Title IV-E agencies have discretion to define "relative" and "kin" when determining to whom they will apply the relative licensing and approval standards. We encourage agencies to define relative and kin in a way that is inclusive of tribal custom and adopt a broad definition of relative and kin for purposes of licensing and approval standards."

<sup>6</sup> Beltran & Epstein, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network. (2024). [Kin-Specific Licensing: Progress So Far](#) [Webinar].

<sup>8</sup> Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network. (2024).

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### Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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