



Why should child protection agencies **adopt a kin-first approach?**

There are many benefits – both human and financial – associated with kinship care. A [systematic review of more than 100 studies](#) found that when compared with children in non-relative foster care, children in kinship care have:

- More stability in placement and greater likelihood of remaining with siblings.
- Lower rates of both re-abuse and institutional abuse.
- Better behavioral and mental health, exhibited by fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors, better adaptive behaviors, fewer psychiatric disorders, and better emotional health.
- Higher likelihood of achieving permanency through guardianship with their relative caregivers to maintain life-long connections with their family if they are unable to safely return home.

Despite these outcomes, the child welfare system historically has been designed to remove children from their parents and keep them away from their kin. We now know it is best for children to stay connected with their families, and to have as many family and community networks as possible. Nearly one-third (31%) of all children in out-of-home care are placed with relatives, but there is considerable variation across states, ranging from a low of 5% to a high of 46%.¹ Differences in how [state policy](#) defines, licenses, and pays kin contribute to this variation.



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In 2017, adults in the U.S. cared for **more than 2.6 million of their relative children** through formal and informal care.

—KIDS COUNT, 2018
Annie E. Casey Foundation

We must **redesign the system from a kin-first perspective**. If children need to be removed from their homes, a kin-first agency seeks to make every child's first — and hopefully only — placement with kin. Policies, practices, and even agency culture may need to shift so that placing children with kin becomes the norm, and placing children with strangers, the exception.

Importance of supporting kin caregivers

Simply placing children with kin does not ensure that those children will thrive. Kinship families need adequate support. **For many families, the desire to care for their relative children is unquestionable, but the financial hardship of adding children to their household is a barrier.** [Poverty rates among kinship care providers](#) are almost twice the U.S. average and research has consistently shown that compared to non-kin caregivers, relative

caregivers have more limited social networks and resources, and they receive less formal foster care training and support.²

In order to maintain kinship care, it is critical to address the unmet financial needs of relative caregivers and ensure they have tools to successfully raise the children in their care. For example, relative caregivers in Allegheny County, Pa., receive child care for younger children and a per diem to help offset additional financial costs, even before the licensure process is complete. This is made possible through a partnership between the county and the state. Support also is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, through the child protection agency and a community provider, [A Second Chance, Inc.](#)

Research indicates that when relatives have the financial means to care for their kin, they are willing to do so. An examination of 30 Guardianship Assistance Programs (GAP) found that when GAP payments were equitable with regular foster care maintenance payments, the number of placements with guardians doubled or tripled, without any additional interventions. However, only about one-third of states and the District of Columbia currently outline in their [state statutes](#) how caregivers should be paid when caring for a relative child. In addition to financial support, kinship caregivers also need [assistance navigating the child welfare system](#) and identifying other government resources to adequately support the children in their care.

Who would you want to care for your own children or grandchildren? Would you want people you know and love and can trust, or would you want a stranger? Developmentally, no matter how old the children are, isn't it easier for them to come to live with their grandparents, who they know and love and are familiar with? When you think about it rationally, it makes all the sense in the world to try and keep children with their extended family and maintain their family ties.

— MARC CHERNA,
DIRECTOR OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES³

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A KIN-FIRST PARTNERSHIP: ALLEGHENY COUNTY AND A SECOND CHANCE, INC.

Allegheny County achieved a kin-first approach by partnering exclusively with A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) for kinship care services. ASCI specializes in **recruiting, licensing, and supporting kin as a primary placement option**. Supported through this unique partnership, Allegheny County boasts a 65% kin placement rate.

ASCI re-envisioned the approach to out-of-home care through the lens of a kinship triad, which includes the child/youth, birth family, and caregiver. ASCI supports all members of the triad, in both Allegheny and Philadelphia counties, through a range of strategies:

- **Family finding and kinship navigator services** — to identify family resources and prevent the trauma of placement in a stranger's home whenever possible — begin as soon as the county agency initiates removal.
- **Strengths-based assessment tools** keep the focus on kin as assets for children.
- **Case managers** orient and train new kinship families, certify and license kinship foster family homes, and provide ongoing monitoring and assessment, 24-hour support, and aftercare.

- **Reunification support** is provided to birth parents and their children through parenting classes, support groups, and visitation support.
- **Family transportation services** support supervised family visits, court and medical appointments, and keep 95% of children and youth in care in their home schools.
- **In-home clinical services** offer mental wellness support to children in care and their families.
- **Respite services** support caregivers with short-term placement alternatives during vacations, illness, or emergency through approved foster parents.
- **Kinship closet** provides new and gently used clothing to kinship families.
- **Services for children and youth** are offered to youth in care as well as all siblings.

ASCI also offers technical assistance, training and community building for other jurisdictions and agencies in order to help them expand their capacity to engage kin as primary placement options.

Source: A Second Chance, Inc. presentation materials 3/20/2019

Dr. Sharon McDaniel — founder, president and CEO of A Second Chance, Inc. — is a trustee of Casey Family Programs.

Our system needs to allow relatives to be a part of the process from the beginning. Families should not be torn apart but helped to heal and rebuild. Families succeed when they are working toward one goal: the best interest of the child.

— GAIL ENGEL,
RELATIVE CAREGIVER IN COLORADO⁴

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Grandfamilies.org has developed a [wikiHow for Kinship Toolkit](#) to help agencies advance a kin-first culture, which includes a seven-step process and jurisdictional examples in each of the steps.

Strategies to support kin caregivers

The importance of preserving family and community ties, as well as the significant role that relatives play in keeping children safe and healthy, is well established. Jurisdictions and nonprofit organizations have developed a number of strategies to facilitate, establish, and maintain connections with kin for children in out-of-home care. The following Casey Family Programs resources explore these strategies in more detail:

- [How can we ensure a child's first placement is with a family?](#) Includes strategies from jurisdictions that have reduced the use of shelter care, often by increasing kin placements.
- [What are some examples of effective family search and engagement?](#) Offers the core components

of family search and engagement, together with promising approaches.

- [How can the home study and licensure process prioritize and support kin caregivers?](#) Discusses the value of licensing relatives, along with strategies and examples for designing home study and licensing processes to meet the needs of kin caregivers, rather than processes that prioritize strangers.
- [What are kinship navigator programs?](#) Provides an overview of the history and status of kinship navigator programs.
- [How have some states developed and funded kinship navigator programs?](#) Details strategies that agencies have used for attaining and sustaining funding for kinship navigators.
- [How did Allegheny County advance a kin-first approach?](#) Explains how a child welfare agency moved away from congregate care in favor of placing children with relatives.
- [How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?](#) Chronicles the development of a kin-first approach in Allegheny County.



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We are not foster families. We need to be acknowledged and treated as a separate and distinct group. While many services and supports may overlap, our position in this situation is very different.

— CAROLINE DORAN,
RELATIVE CAREGIVER IN OHIO⁴

- 1 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Report System (AFCARS) data, as analyzed by Casey Family Programs, 6/25/2019.
- 2 Ching-Hsuan. L. (2014). Evaluating services for kinship care families: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 36. 32–41.
- 3 Personal communication, Marc Cherna, Director of Allegheny County Department of Human Services, October 4, 2018.
- 4 [Family Voices United Campaign](#), survey response, March 2019.

P 800.228.3559
P 206.282.7300
F 206.282.3555

[casey.org](#) | KMResources@casey.org

