



STRATEGY BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

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

More than 2.5 million children currently are being raised by their grandparents and other relatives,<sup>1</sup> both formally through the child welfare system and informally through private family arrangements. When these caregivers take on this responsibility, they often receive little to no financial support or advice regarding how to navigate the many systems that they might need to access to 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 supporting kin caregivers, many still get lost in the competing demands of caseworkers. Kinship navigator programs help fill that gap by providing 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 needed, permanency for the children placed in their home.

This brief provides information about the essential elements of kinship navigator programs, as well as jurisdictional examples and evaluation outcomes. For information regarding developing and funding kinship navigator programs, see our accompanying strategy brief: “How have some states developed and funded kinship navigator programs?”



# What are kinship navigator programs?

## What do kinship navigator programs provide?

Kinship navigator programs offer information, referral, and follow-up services to grandparents and other relatives raising children to link them to the benefits and services that they or the children need. Kinship navigator programs also help agencies and providers tune into the needs of families headed by relatives and provide education to the community about the kinship caregivers and the systems they must navigate. In some cases, the kinship navigators assume multiple roles. (For example, kinship navigators in Allegheny County, Pa., assist in crisis family placements as well as family finding.<sup>2</sup>)

Grandfamilies.org offers a kinship navigator webpage at <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Topics/Kinship-Navigator-Programs/Kinship-Navigator-Programs-Summary-Analysis> that includes strategies and jurisdictional examples.

Kinship navigator programs assist kinship caregivers in learning about, finding, and using programs and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising, in addition to their own needs as caregivers. They also promote effective partnerships among public and private agencies to ensure kinship caregiver families are served. In order to receive federal funding under the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, kinship navigator programs must:<sup>3</sup>

- Be coordinated with other state or local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referral services, including entities that provide 2-1-1 or 3-1-1 information systems where available.

- Be planned and operated in consultation with kinship caregivers and organizations representing them, youth raised by kinship caregivers, relevant government agencies, and relevant community-based or faith-based organizations.
- Establish information and referral systems that link (via toll-free access) kinship caregivers, kinship support group facilitators, and kinship service providers to:
  - Each other.
  - Eligibility and enrollment information for federal, state, and local benefits.
  - Relevant training to assist kinship caregivers in caregiving and in obtaining benefits and services.
  - Relevant legal assistance and help in obtaining legal services.
- Provide outreach to kinship care families, including by establishing, distributing, and updating a kinship care website, or other relevant guides or outreach materials.
- Promote partnerships between public and private agencies, including schools, community-based or faith-based organizations, and relevant government agencies, to increase their knowledge of the needs of kinship care families to promote better services for those families.

## What is the history of kinship navigation?

In 2004, Casey Family Programs implemented a kinship navigator project in collaboration with the State of Washington.<sup>4</sup> Funding for this pilot was provided to the Department of Social and Health Services' Aging and Disability Services Administration through Casey Family Programs and the Washington State Legislature. According to Generations United, other kinship navigator programs launched around the same time, including those in Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York.<sup>5</sup>



## What are kinship navigator programs?

The first federal funding for kinship navigator programs arrived via Children's Bureau Family Connection discretionary grants, provided as part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Thirteen programs were funded in 2009 in the first round of Family Connection grants, and a second round of seven grantees were funded from 2012 through 2015.<sup>6</sup> As of October 2018, the federal government now provides a dedicated funding stream for kinship navigator programs.<sup>7</sup> Under the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, jurisdictions are able to receive ongoing federal reimbursement for up to 50 percent of their expenditures to provide kinship navigator programs that meet certain evidence-based requirements of promising, supported, or well-supported practices. This federal support is available regardless of whether the children for whom the services are being accessed meet income eligibility requirements for Title IV-E.

### What are some jurisdictional examples?

As of April 2018, approximately 26 states operate 70 kinship navigator programs.<sup>8</sup> Some examples of longstanding, comprehensive kinship navigator programs include:

- [Children's Home Network Kinship \(Tampa, Fla.\)](#)
- [Georgia Kinship Navigator Program](#)
- [New York State Kinship Navigator](#)
- [Richland County \(Ohio\) Kinship Family Center](#)
- [Washington State Kinship Care](#)

**Washington's program** is active in 30 of the state's 39 counties and provides a wide array of services, including:

- Information and assistance to caregivers so they can access relevant federal and state benefits.



# What are kinship navigator programs?

- Proactive mediation with state agency staff and/or service providers and, when necessary, assistance in establishing relationships between kinship caregivers and relevant state and federal agency staff, including Area Agencies on Aging and the Office of Education Ombudsman.
- Accompanying grandfamilies to court to help them navigate the legal system.
- Access to a \$1 million state fund to provide short-term support to grandfamilies, such as paying for a crib or school supplies.
- Supportive listening to grandparents and relatives of all ages who are raising children or planning to do so.
- Active outreach to locate kinship care families, identifying those not involved in support group networks and/or in need of additional services, with special attention on relatives from geographically isolated or ethnic communities.
- Strong collaborative relationships with groups and agencies working with kinship caregivers.
- Education in the community, including to service providers and faith-based organizations, about the needs of kinship care families and available resources and services.
- Follow-up with grandfamilies to ensure they are receiving services and benefits and have the support they need.

Since 2003, **Richland County's** child protection agency has partnered with Urban Minority Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Outreach Programs and the City of Mansfield to provide kinship navigation services at the Kinship Family Center. Richland County kinship programs offer information and referral, case management, support groups, mental health services, substance abuse assessment and treatment, legal services, in-home services, basic hard goods purchases, home management, housing assistance, transportation, financial support, and child care.<sup>9</sup>

The kinship navigation model used by **Children's Home Network** in Florida includes: an e-application (an online service portal where caregivers may apply for eligible benefits and services, with the application completed in the relative's home via laptop computer); peer-to-peer support (hiring grandparents and other relatives who have lived the caregiving experience and can mentor and coach kinship caregivers); and an interdisciplinary team (professionals from various disciplines who work together to help kinship caregivers solve complex problems).<sup>10</sup> The program utilizes an array of standardized assessments to address family and developmental needs, stress, health, and well-being, incorporating a wraparound model and family-driven approach that partners with key community members to support and strengthen kinship care arrangements.

For the last 12 years, the **State of New York** has operated a Kinship Navigator County Collaboration between child welfare, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and community agencies in all 62 counties, including information, referral, education, and advocacy through a help line, and access to public and legal assistance.

The Kinship Navigator Program in **Georgia** was implemented 10 years ago, and now includes 15 regional kinship navigators who assist kinship families in identifying and locating resources within their local community.

## What is the evidence base?

Kinship navigator programs have been found to support positive outcomes in:<sup>11</sup>

- **Safety:** Relative caregivers receiving navigator services achieved identified safety goals for their families.
- **Permanency:** Children in relative care receiving navigation services had higher rates of permanency through legal guardianship and reunification with parents.

# What are kinship navigator programs?

- **Well-being:** Kinship navigator programs successfully addressed the needs of kinship families.

Specifically, a five-year evaluation of Florida's 2012 kinship navigator grant found:<sup>12</sup>

- **Low rates of re-entry:** 99 percent of participants' children did not enter the child welfare system at the 12-month follow-up, reflecting placement stability and child safety.
- **Cost savings:** Program costs were less than half of those associated with adjudicating a child dependent. Non-relative foster care was found to

be six times more expensive and residential group care more than 21 times as expensive as the navigator program.

Similarly, an evaluation of Washington's kinship navigator program found:<sup>13</sup>

- Relative caregivers had a better understanding of services and benefits available to them.
- An estimated 690 children did not have to enter the foster care system.
- 98 percent of caregivers who used the service were satisfied.

To learn more, see related resources at: [Casey.org/What-Are-Kinship-Navigators](http://Casey.org/What-Are-Kinship-Navigators)

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- 2 Personal communication, Jacki Hoover, Assistant Deputy Director, Allegheny County Children Youth and Families, June 6, 2018.
- 3 US Department of Health and Human Services, (2018). ACYF-CB-PI-18-05. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/pi1805.pdf>
- 4 TriWest Group. (2005). *Casey Family Programs Kinship Caregiver Navigator Pilot: Final pilot evaluation report (July 1, 2004 to November 30, 2005)*. Retrieved from <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/KinshipNavigatorEvaluationReport.pdf>
- 5 See <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Topics/Kinship-Navigator-Programs/Kinship-Navigator-Programs-Summary-Analysis>
- 6 See <http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees.html>
- 7 Stoltzfus, E. (2018). *CRS Insight: Family First Prevention Services Act*. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/IN10858.pdf>
- 8 For a complete list of kinship navigator programs, visit: [http://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/Kinship%20Navigator%20Programs%20%282018%20update%29\\_1.xlsx](http://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/Kinship%20Navigator%20Programs%20%282018%20update%29_1.xlsx)
- 9 Lent, J., & Beltran, A. (2018). *Opportunities – Kinship navigator programs*. Presentation on June 28, 2018, for Casey Family Programs.
- 10 See <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Topics/Kinship-Navigator-Programs/Kinship-Navigator-Programs-Summary-Analysis>
- 11 James Bell & Associates. (2013). *Family Connection Discretionary Grants 2009: Funded Grantees Cross-Site Evaluation Report – Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees\\_public/2009/fam%20conn%202009%20cross-site%20final%20report%206-17-13.pdf](http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees_public/2009/fam%20conn%202009%20cross-site%20final%20report%206-17-13.pdf)  
James Bell & Associates. (2013). *Family Connection Discretionary Grants 2009-Funded Grantees Cross-Site Evaluation Report – Final Summary and Recommendations*. Retrieved from [http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees\\_public/2009/Fam%20Conn%20Summary%20and%20Recommendations%206-17-13%20Stand-Alone%20Final.pdf](http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees_public/2009/Fam%20Conn%20Summary%20and%20Recommendations%206-17-13%20Stand-Alone%20Final.pdf)
- 12 Littlewood, K. (2015). Kinship Services Network Program: Five-year evaluation of family support and case management for informal kinship families. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 52, 184-191.
- 13 TriWest Group. (2005).

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