



Kinship Navigator Programs Practical Tips and Resources

Definition of Kinship Navigator Programs

Federal law defines kinship navigator programs as programs that assist kinship caregivers in learning about, finding, and using programs and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising and their own needs, and promote effective partnerships among public and private agencies to ensure kinship caregiver families are served. 42 U.S.C. 627.

Background on Kinship Navigator Programs

Kinship navigator programs started over fifteen years ago as state and county initiatives to help kinship caregivers, by which we mean grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, other extended family members, and close family friends who raise children when their parents cannot. These programs assist kinship caregivers in navigating the many systems that impact them, including child welfare, aging, education, housing and health care. Washington State, Ohio and New Jersey all had robust statewide kinship navigator programs, and several other states and communities also had programs.

The early kinship navigator programs and those that followed were developed around the basic premise of promoting and supporting children being raised by relatives if their parents cannot raise them. Decades of research has shown that children thrive with relatives and these programs help ensure that the families are supported so that children do not have to enter unrelated foster care. Beginning with the landmark Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, federal, state and tribal laws acknowledge this research and have legal preferences for kin placements over placements with non-related foster parents.

To support more kinship families, advocates sought to obtain federal funding to expand kinship navigator programs into additional communities. These advocacy efforts resulted in the authorization of Family Connection Grants through passage of the [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) (Fostering Connections Act). There were two rounds of competitive grants in 2009 and 2012 under this successful program. A cross-evaluation of all of the 2009 kinship navigator grantees found that the kinship families served achieved safety goals and higher rates of permanency and the programs were successful at ameliorating the needs of the families. However, these three-year federally funded grant programs did not have to meet evidence-based standards. Consequently, none of these state or federal grantee kinship navigator programs had been

found by the “California Clearinghouse” or any other recognized national entity to meet evidence-based standards.

Based on the success of the early programs and the federal grantees, Congress passed the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Family First Act), which provides for ongoing federal reimbursement as of October 2018 for up to 50 percent of a state or tribe’s costs in implementing a kinship navigator program. The Family First Act adopted the same program requirements from the Fostering Connections Act that applied to the earlier federal grantees but added the requirement that these programs must be found by a “Title IV-E Clearinghouse” (Clearinghouse) to meet evidence-based standards of promising, supported or well-supported.

As of January 2020, the Clearinghouse has not included a single kinship navigator program as meeting evidence-based standards. Consequently, no program is currently eligible to receive federal reimbursement. This poses a huge challenge for states and tribes that could follow a model with fidelity and receive the reimbursement.

To help states and tribes new to kinship navigator programs get up and running, and to help existing kinship navigator programs meet new evidence-based standards, Congress appropriated separate pots of money in FY2018, FY2019, and FY2020 for non-competitive grants for states and tribes to develop, enhance or evaluate kinship navigator programs. Virtually all of states and tribes have applied and received funds. However, without a federally accepted evidence-based model, many of them are struggling. Even the states and tribes with established programs are facing barriers meeting Clearinghouse criteria and practices. They are struggling with ways to ethically address federal requirements to have control groups and firm start and end dates for the provision of services. No program wants to turn away needy families, and many kinship navigator programs do not serve families with start and end dates because families’ needs vary greatly, and they may need to come in and out of the program for different lengths of times. These caregiving relationships often last for years, with the needs of the children and caregivers changing as they age.

So, the question comes up time and again – *What do we do until a model is identified by the Clearinghouse?*

Drawing on over twenty years of work in this area, Generations United, in partnership with kinship navigators around the country, have developed this tip sheet of elements to include in a successful kinship navigator program. These steps can be implemented prior to the Clearinghouse’s inclusion of a model program.

Fostering Connections Act Criteria for Kinship Navigator Programs

The following program requirements exist for all kinship navigator programs seeking federal reimbursement and can be found at 42 U.S.C. 627. Action can be taken on these requirements while waiting for an evidence-based model or while conducting your own evaluation and seeking more guidance from the Clearinghouse to assist that process.

Kinship navigator program requirements:

- Must be coordinated with other State or local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referral services, including the entities that provide 2–1–1 or 3–1–1 information systems where available, to avoid duplication or fragmentation of services to kinship care families.
- Must 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.
- Must 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; and
 - relevant legal assistance and help in obtaining legal services.
- Must provide outreach to kinship care families, including by establishing, distributing, and updating a kinship care website, or other relevant guides or outreach materials.
- Must 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.
- Under federal law, these programs may also establish and support a kinship care ombudsman with authority to intervene and help kinship caregivers access services; and support any other activities designed to assist kinship caregivers in obtaining benefits and services to improve their caregiving.

Tips for Kinship Navigator Programs that Build on Legal Requirements

- **Serve kinship caregivers regardless of child welfare involvement.** Although kinship navigator programs seeking federal support are technically allowed by law and policy to restrict the families they serve to those involved with the child welfare system, we recommend that they serve a broader population of kinship families.

Kinship navigator programs began as a way to help keep children from needing to enter foster care. The families outside the system are the ones who typically need the most help “navigating” the maze of services that may be available at the community level, through the state and county TANF offices, education, aging, health care, housing, etc. Those caregivers who are raising children in the legal custody of the child welfare agency typically have help accessing critical services like school enrollment and health care consent for the child. Those outside the system typically do not have any help and kinship navigator programs are critical to them.

Consider kinship navigator programs as a prevention tool – a way to help support the families outside the child welfare system and to prevent children from entering the far

more costly child welfare system. Nationally for every one child in foster care, there are 19 outside the system with a relative caregiver. In several states, the numbers are far more dramatic with the number of children outside the system in the triple digits as compared to one child in foster care.

However, in addition to serving as a prevention tool, kinship navigator programs also play an important role in providing specialized help to families who are involved with the child welfare system. Kinship foster families also need tailored help, particularly as they are navigating decisions and processes related to becoming a fully licensed foster parent to their related child.

- **Involve kinship caregivers and youth in all aspects of program development and implementation.** Get the voices of the families to tell you what they need and how to deliver it. Reach out and invite them to the table authentically and from the inception. If not possible from the inception, get them involved as soon as possible. The federal Children’s Bureau has emphasized the importance of authentic engagement of family voices in planning, implementing and evaluating all child welfare services in a [2019 Information Memorandum](#). Generations United manages a national network of relative caregivers called GRAND Voices. Members exist in almost every state and many tribes. Generations United can help connect you to those voices who are trained and prepared to participate in a professional and thoughtful way.
- **Ensure that the program is not simply virtual and includes on the ground well-supported in-person navigation.** Websites, brochures, and warm lines are critical and required components of these programs, but they must exist in combination with trained individuals who serve as navigators. The program must be well staffed and well supported financially so kinship families do not have to be turned away.
- **Hire and train kinship caregivers and adults who grew up in kinship care as navigators.** Strive to hire and train relative caregivers and adults who grew up in their care as navigators. Engaging peer navigators helps address service barriers that often emerge due to trust issues between caregivers and social service providers. Research shows that peer navigators are more successful at connecting their peers with resources than degreed professionals. See KIN-Tech. The Children’s Home, Inc. [Final Evaluation Report](#).
- **House the program in trusted community organizations, not the child welfare agency.** In general, with very few exceptions, these programs should not be housed in the child welfare agency because of trust issues. Caregivers often fear that the children could be removed from their care by the child welfare agency and put into non-related foster care. As a result, caregivers and children may be hesitant to seek services or to share critical information needed to ensure they receive the appropriate supports for their family’s needs.
- **Contract with community organizations serving the families.** Reach out to community and state organizations with dedicated kinship services and contract with them. Get

them on board early in the process or as soon as possible and solicit their input throughout the design and implementation of the program. Consult your state-specific Grand Fact Sheet for organizations and their contact information, www.grandfamilies.org/State-Fact-Sheets. These organizations have developed trust with the families. Consider one of them as a physical location to house and operate the kinship navigator program.

- **Partner with all relevant government agencies and community organizations.**

In addition to those organizations you contract with, partner and regularly meet with government agencies and other community organizations serving the families. Not only will the partnership help develop and deliver services and supports to kinship families, partners will learn from one another about promising practices and how to effectively respond to the families' strengths and challenges.

Consider establishing a formal community collaborative. Florida's established kinship navigator program at Children's Home Network has Memorandums of Agreement (MoAs) with many agencies and a process for referrals so that it is as seamless as possible.

Partner with government agencies, including:

- Education
- Economic security/family assistance
- Nutrition supports
- Housing
- Aging

Aging is particularly important and often overlooked. Partner with them and maximize your impact. Your state or tribal unit on aging administers the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP), which may provide supportive services to grandparents and other relatives age 55+ raising children through Area Agencies on Aging or non-profits with which they contract. AAAs or those they contract with typically do not turn away caregivers under age 55, they use other funds to support them. If your state or AAA does not serve kinship families yet, they can and reaching out to let them know of the need will help. Services under NFCSP include information to caregivers about available services and accessing those services; individual counseling, support groups, and caregiver training; respite care; and "supplement services." Some states use NFCSP funds to provide legal services and even direct payments.

Community partners that do not traditionally serve kinship families as separate programs:

- 2-1-1 or 3-1-1 information systems
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters - try to find Bigs who were raised in kinship care

- Legal aid and law school clinics that could provide much needed legal assistance to kinship families who have had no child welfare involvement and need help obtaining legal custody or adoption
 - Schools of social work who can help with services and/or program evaluation
 - Tutoring providers
 - Child care providers
 - Mental health and respite providers
 - Partnerships with providers like the Humane Society to help those pursuing foster parent approval/licensure get vaccines for their pets
- **Ensure staff in partner agencies and organizations are well-trained on the strengths and needs of kinship caregivers and how best to serve them.** So many systems serve kinship families as part of their client base. However, staff is often unaware of the families' unique circumstances and how programs impact them. For example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grants are often the only source of ongoing support to meet the needs of the children in kinship families, yet relevant agency staff is often unaware of these grants. They may not have unique application forms and do not know that eligibility criteria differ from TANF family grants.

Often kinship caregivers will read or hear of a program for “parents” and think it does not include them. Staff must be sensitive to this and the many ways access to programs can differ for kinship families.

- **Develop a comprehensive website with legal tools and practical resources that can help the families know their legal and financial options.**
 - Host the website through a partner organization or a neutral URL. Do not use the child welfare agency's website.
 - Create a user-friendly form that would lead families to their legal options and the public benefits and community supports available to them. Something like the locator tool developed by Nevada's Foster Kinship at www.fosterkinship.org/resource-locator/
 - Include a clickable county map with community resources. Consider a map like that on the New York state kinship navigator website: www.nysnavigator.org/
 - Highlight information and tools on the various legal options. Partner with legal providers to produce these tools and webpages. For example, Washington State's Kinship Navigator program partnered with a community legal provider to [prepare a useful legal handbook for kinship families, available in both English and Spanish](#). A national resource, which you are welcome to link to, is [National Comparison Chart: Adoption and Guardianship for Children in Kinship Foster Care](#). Include the array of legal options for kinship caregivers both inside and outside the system. For those caring for children in the legal custody of the state or tribe, ensure

- that you have thoughtful information about the requirements to become a licensed kinship foster parent. For those caregivers with no child welfare involvement and who do not want or cannot pursue a legal relationship to the children, but need help accessing education and health care services on their behalf, information should be shared about power of attorney laws and [educational and health care consent or authorization laws](#).
- Include clear and specific information on available public benefits and income supports. The website should contain eligibility criteria, rates, and forms. Make it as easy and transparent as possible for the caregivers to apply for supports including TANF child-only grants, Medicaid, SNAP or “food stamps”, housing assistance, school lunch, Women, Infants and Children’s Program (WIC), available federal and state tax credits, in addition to guardianship and adoption assistance for those children exiting foster care.
 - Consider producing and uploading videos exploring the various legal options and how to apply for benefits, including TANF child-only grants. Caregivers and stakeholders in your community will know which applications are most difficult to complete and where videos would be most useful.
 - Consider implementing a short survey for users asking them about the website.
 - **Include a phone number to talk to a well-informed individual, preferably a trained peer kinship caregiver.** Caregivers often have complicated challenges that are better and more personally addressed on the phone or in-person than simply by email. Have staff who are good at developing rapport and trust with the families. Being useful will spread by word of mouth, which is often the most successful outreach strategy.
 - **Implement the use of a kinship assessment tool.** Using a well-crafted tool that explores all the areas of strengths and challenges with a caregiver is an effective and thoughtful way to get at their needs without having to resort to a general “what do you need help with” question that can cause caregivers to shut down. They often fear their answer to such a question will make them look too needy and will jeopardize the children’s placement with them. Approach it from the perspective of what you can do to help. For examples of such tools, see www.grandfamilies.org/wikiHow-for-Kinship-Foster-Care
 - **Engage an evaluator from the inception, if evaluating your own kinship navigator program.** It is most effective if evaluators are involved from the beginning of your program. Evaluators can provide invaluable input on program development and data collection that will save time and money down the road. They can help conduct focus groups to effectively consider the voices of the families and all relevant stakeholders. Child Trends has produced a brief [Applying the Research and Evaluation Provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act](#), which may be helpful.

- **Invest in data collection, data collection partnerships, computer systems and technical support, whether evaluating your own program or not.**

You will need skilled data collection whether you evaluate your own program or show fidelity to an eventual model included in the Title IV-E Clearinghouse.

- **Employ outreach strategies.** Reaching kinship families where they go for the children is often the best way to find them. A printed brochure about your services to share in pediatrician offices and schools can be very useful. You can also post it on your website.

Another promising practice is from New York’s kinship navigator program. That program provides a “permission to contact form” to their child welfare and TANF/family assistance offices. When caregivers go to those agencies, the staff ask if they will complete and sign the form and then staff faxes the form to the kinship navigator. The kinship navigator makes five attempts to reach the caregiver to explore how they can help. You could experiment with which types of agencies to give these forms to, as it might also be helpful to have them at pediatrician offices and in schools.

Additional No-Cost National Resources Designed for Caregivers

Generations United’s [Grand Resource: Help for Grandfamilies Impacted by Opioids and Other Substance Use](#)

Generations United’s [A Grandparent’s and Other Relative’s Guide to Raising Children with Disabilities](#)

Generations United’s [Grand Resources: A Fact Sheet for Grandparent and Relative Caregivers to Help Access Support through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) Program](#)

H & R Block’s [Tax Benefits for Grandparents](#)

Additional No-Cost National Resources Designed for Program and Policy Professionals

Generations United’s [December 2018 regional Kinship Navigator webinars \(recordings and slides\)](#)

[Engaging Kinship Caregivers With Dr. Joseph Crumbley](#) – a 5-part video training for caseworkers
[Implementing the Family First Prevention Services Act - A detailed question and answer document featuring a section concerning relatives raising children.](#)

Please do not hesitate to contact Generations United with any questions. Ana Beltran, the author of this piece, can be reached at abeltran@gu.org or 425-659-3500; Jaia Lent at jlent@gu.org or 202-777-0115; and Diane Roznowski at droznowski@gu.org or 202-777-0118.

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