



RAISING OUR VOICES

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS
TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING FOR CHILDREN
AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



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SUPPORTED KINSHIP CARE DIVERSION: A KEY TOOL FOR KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

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RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To support kinship caregivers and keep more children safely at home and out of foster care, Congress should 1) make all forms of kinship care the third required Title IV-E program and 2) require states to collect data on their kinship programs, specifically looking at the efficacy and benefits of voluntary supported diversion kinship care.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By establishing and funding a voluntary supported kinship care diversion model, we can support kinship families for better outcomes for kids, families, and the child welfare system.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I was two years old, my first experience with kinship care was when my siblings and I were placed in our maternal grandmother's care. Over the next 12 years, I would spend most of my adolescence raised by my grandmother. My grandmother loved me; this fact is indisputable. When I was with my grandmother, I knew what it meant to be loved. To the best of her ability, my grandmother always tried to provide my siblings and I with a safe, healthy, and loving home. My grandmother's efforts to meet all my needs never went unnoticed. However, neither did the fact that she struggled to meet her caregiving duties with access to limited resources.

That point was never more evident than when my grandmother sat us down to ask if we thought it would be best if she surrendered us to state care. Many people wonder why my grandmother would be willing to "give up" her caregiver role. The simple answer is this; she did not have the necessary support or services to meet the full range of our needs.

Neglect looks like abuse to the public without looking closely at causation. My grandmother did everything she could to wrap support around me so I was cared for. My grandmother worked multiple jobs to provide for us, even given her older age.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

Additionally, my grandmother utilized state and local resources such as food stamps and non-profit services, including discounted or free clothing suppliers, school supply drives, and food centers. However, these minimal supports were unreliable and did not ultimately meet my grandmother's needs. Due to our chronic lack of resources, I recall times when I was hungry or the utilities were shut off.

My grandmother provided voluntary diversion kinship care to me for as long as she could. Her doing so saved my life, preserved my family connections, and delayed the abuse I would later experience while in foster care. However, stories like mine should not exist in the first place. While my grandmother unburdened the child welfare system when she agreed to care for four children, the system provided her with nothing in return. Instead, she was left alone with little to hang onto. If staying with my grandmother meant experiencing “neglect,” I would choose it time and time again over my experience in foster care. Youth should never have had to make that choice. My recommendations below outline policies that can better support voluntary diversion kinship families outside the child welfare system without having to enter into state custody.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

The data tells us that kids do best when they are kept in their families. A recent report by Chapin Hall states that, “for children in foster care, compared to placing them with strangers, kinship care has been shown to be safer, to be more likely to result in a permanent home for children, and to result in improved child well-being...[additionally] children in foster care with relatives are also more likely to maintain their cultural identities and stay connected to their siblings and communities” (Armendariz, 2023).

When it becomes unsafe for a child to remain in their family unit, they are taken into the state's custody or informally diverted through voluntary kinship care. Generally, voluntary diversion kinship care occurs when a child is living or is placed with a relative or other safe adult, such as a close family friend. Currently, more than 2.5 million children in the United States are under some form of kinship care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). The concept of kinship care may seem relatively straightforward when looking at the definition, but it is anything but that. Currently, there are three major “categories” regarding kinship care: formal, voluntary, and informal kinship care (Armendariz, 2023). This report focuses on voluntary diversion kinship families.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

While there is no uniform definition or practice for voluntary diversion kinship care, the general idea is that instead of the state taking formal custody, the child welfare agency works with the family to place the child with a kin caregiver to keep the child out of formal foster care. Unfortunately, there is minimal recent data on this population of youth and caregivers (Malm et al., 2019). However, a 2013 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which referenced 2003 data, stated that there were about 400,000 children “diverted from state custody to live with kin” throughout the nation (Foundation, 2013). Even though the data is lacking, we know that some form of kinship diversion practice is being implemented, but the extent and its effectiveness are unknown (Malm et al., 2019).

Kinship families are the invisible, unsupported backbone of the child welfare system. Parents across the country are making the difficult decision to ask individuals within their family unit if they care for their children to avoid contact with the foster care system. Like my grandmother, thousands of kin across the country are making the difficult decision to step up as caregivers, oftentimes at the risk of their own financial stability and well-being. Unlike foster parents, who receive notice before taking in a child, kin caregivers are usually asked to care for children without warning and planning. These kinship families and placements embody the definition of prevention. However, rather than support these families to prevent further system involvement and spur positive outcomes, the government provides kinship caregivers less than it provides strangers who care for children involved in traditional foster care.

With the right model, voluntary supported kinship care diversion can be the solution to reducing the number of children and families involved in the system and all the unintended consequences resulting from that experience. Elements of successful kinship diversion include an appropriate risk assessment to ensure the children’s safety, full disclosure of options for kin caregivers, appropriate needs assessment, and services to ensure all kin caregivers and birth families have the support they need to be successful (Foundation, 2013). This would not only improve outcomes for children and families, but it would also be significantly more cost-effective for our country.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To support kinship caregivers and keep more children safely at home and out of foster care, Congress should:

- **Make all forms of kinship care the third required Title IV-E program.**
 - Currently, there are only two required programs that state plans must include if they intend to draw down Title IV-E funding: (1) the intent to provide foster care and (2) adoption assistance. Given that we know kids do better in kinship care settings, it is time kinship care is the third required program to be included in state plans.
 - Use the Kinship Diversion Model (Foundation, 2013), as a foundation for guidance to the states on inclusion criteria for any voluntary supported kinship care diversion model. This guidance should be developed in partnership with young people, parents, and kinship caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system and informal kinship care diversion.
- **Require states to collect data on their kinship programs, specifically looking at the efficacy and benefits of voluntary supported diversion kinship care.**

Meet the Author



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"Glenda Wright (she/her/hers) recently graduated from the Salmon P. Chase College of Law, where she received her Juris Doctorate in May 2022. Glenda has also earned her Bachelor of Science in business with a minor in legal studies from Murray State University. While attending law school, Glenda participated in several extracurricular activities, including serving as senior editor of the Northern Kentucky Law Review and being president of the Phi Alpha Delta: Hoffman Chapter. In August 2020, Glenda and her business partner, Tyler Hunter, launched Wright & Hunter Consulting, a firm focused on working with and strengthening all partners in the child welfare continuum. Glenda's passion for child welfare reform comes from her experiences living in the Kentucky foster care system. That passion has led to numerous policy and legislative changes, including two critical pieces of legislation that helped change the way foster care works for youth in Kentucky. For the past 10 years, Glenda has dedicated herself to improving the child welfare system so that other youth and families like hers don't have to experience what she and so many others do.