

Regional and Tribal Convenings

Themes and Promising Practices

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Introduction

In May and June of 2022, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network), a project of Generations United, supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), hosted five virtual half-day regional convenings. Additionally, one of the Network's key national partners, the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), hosted a virtual half-day tribal convening. These six convenings brought together leaders from various systems within states, tribes, and territories ("jurisdictions") to address challenges and explore promising practices in serving kinship/grandfamilies.

The Network sought to engage individuals with lived experience; leaders and professionals in kinship navigator programs, community- and faith-based organizations, and the following government systems:

- ▶ Aging
- ▶ Child Welfare
- ▶ Disability
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Medicaid/Medicare
- ▶ Nutrition
- ▶ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Pre-Convening Meetings

In preparation for the five virtual half-day regional convenings, the Network conducted 53 hour-long video calls, one for each individual state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The purpose of these pre-convening meetings was to speak with system leaders and learn about each jurisdiction's strengths and challenges in serving kinship/grandfamilies. Leaders highlighted promising practices, shared barriers to serving families, and identified topics they were interested in learning about during the regional convenings. These calls informed each convening's distinct agenda.

Common strengths discussed across jurisdictions included effective partnerships among organizations and agencies, dedicated coalitions/committees meant to improve supports for kinship/grandfamilies, and an emphasis on placing children with kin.

Common challenges identified across jurisdictions included an inability to work collaboratively across systems, difficulty helping families find appropriate housing, complications securing adequate legal supports, and trouble finding and serving families outside the child welfare system.

Due to the large number of federally recognized tribes (574), NICWA had to handle their pre-convening calls differently than the Network. Working on a strategy to center lived experience in their convening, they held two pre-convening calls. One call focused on individuals with lived experience and the other engaged service providers.

Regional and Tribal Convenings

Every convening had three primary goals: (1) to facilitate relationships across systems to better support kinship/grandfamilies; (2) to engage peer learning on kinship/grandfamilies practices and programs and pinpoint consistent challenges; and (3) to inform the Network's future technical assistance, including resource development.

Each interactive regional convening began with a caregiver from the region sharing their story. Then, professionals who are managing promising programs or practices in the region presented on their work. Each convening also included multiple tailored breakout sessions in which participants explored challenges and strengths raised during the pre-convening meetings, facilitated by partners and subject matter experts. The convenings all ended with jurisdiction-specific action planning sessions in which participants identified next steps for working across systems to support kinship/grandfamilies.

The virtual tribal convening used the same basic agenda and format as the regional convenings, with a few adaptations. Rather than opening with one caregiver sharing their story, NICWA featured four caregivers with diverse experiences. The action planning sessions were divided into topic areas that had been addressed throughout the convening, with kin/grandfamily caregivers invited to co-facilitate that planning.

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and more than 40 tribes were represented at the convenings, with an average of 95 attendees per convening and a range of 55 to 113 participants per convening. Child welfare was the

most represented system, with aging and nonprofit kinship/grandfamilies program providers the second- and third-most represented systems. Participants learned about strategies for collaboration among systems, effective kinship/grandfamilies programs, successful outreach practices, new resources, strengths and challenges of kin/grandfamily caregivers and kinship/grandfamilies, and promising housing programs.

Themes and Promising Practices

Cross-System Collaboration

Siloed systems or lack of cross-system collaboration was a commonly reported challenge across regions during pre-convening calls and throughout each of the convenings. Many systems, such as housing, education, and child welfare, impact the wellbeing of kinship/grandfamilies. When cross-system collaboration is not present, families must navigate these complex systems on their own and often run into barriers like rigid eligibility rules and miscommunication about services. The following are promising practices to promote cross-system collaboration that were elevated during the convenings, either through formal presentations or in discussion:

- ▶ **Develop a cross-system committee or council to promote collaboration, discuss challenges, and problem solve to better serve kinship/grandfamilies.**
 - [Colorado Kinship Alliance](#) has been in existence for 18 years. The group, which meets quarterly, includes both caregivers and organizations that serve kinship/grandfamilies. The group shares updates on work and rule changes and gives feedback on forms and processes.
 - The [KIN-TECH Kinship Navigator Practice Model](#) in **Florida** coordinates the Kinship Community Collaborative, a multisystem, multisector partnership that meets monthly to support the kinship navigation work in the community.
 - **Massachusetts** has its [Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#), which serves as a resource on issues affecting kinship/ grandfamilies and includes members from various governmental agencies, legislative branches, and the courts. The Commission liaises between government and private interest groups focused on matters of unique interest and concern to grandparents raising grandchildren.
 - **Washington's** [Kinship Care Oversight Committee](#) includes kin/grandfamily caregivers, child advocates, legislative staff, foster parents, representatives of state agencies, nonprofit service providers, tribes, and the legal community. Together, they have been able to make responsive policy changes to help the families.

- ▶ **Formalize partnerships between agencies and organizations through written agreements and procedures.**
 - In **New Mexico**, Native nations have robust government-to-government relationships with the state. The State Indian Child Welfare Act unit prioritizes cross-system relationships by sending notice immediately to the relevant tribe when a child enters its custody. Unit staff must communicate at least monthly with tribal members and partners regarding supports to the families, such as licensing. To further support Native families, New Mexico recently enacted the [New Mexico Indian Family Protection Act](#).
 - The Family Focused Treatment Association is supporting a [Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care](#) pilot in **North Carolina**. The [initiative](#) promotes partnerships between public county welfare agencies and nonprofit organizations, which train, license, and supervise treatment/therapeutic foster care placements.
 - The **Sitka Tribe** collaborated with Alaska, encouraging them to move beyond just searching for relatives online and instead to work with tribes as their main partners. State-tribe collaboration has resulted in higher percentages of youth being kept with their families. For more information on how kinship/grandfamilies can benefit from collaborative approaches, view this [webinar](#) presented by Dr. Terry Cross, founding executive director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA).
 - **Washington** runs its [statewide kinship navigator program](#) as a collaboration between child welfare and aging.
- ▶ **Use permission to contact forms to seamlessly refer families to the services they need.**
 - The **New York** State Kinship Navigator 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 them to complete and sign the form and then staff send the form to the kinship navigator. The onus to contact the family then shifts to the navigator, who makes five attempts to reach the caregiver to explore how they can help. Other jurisdictions can experiment with where to share these forms. It may be helpful to have them available in pediatricians’ offices and schools.

Kinship Navigator Program Policies

Kinship navigator programs provide information, referrals, and follow-up services to kinship/grandfamilies to link them to the benefits and supports that they need. The federal Family First Prevention Services Act authorizes ongoing 50 percent federal

reimbursement of kinship navigator programs that meet certain evidence-based standards, as determined by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#).

To help programs meet the Clearinghouse's standards, Congress has appropriated funding each year from 2018-2023 to assist states, tribes, and territories in developing, enhancing, or evaluating these programs. See our [Regional Convening Resource List](#) and our [Kinship Navigator Programs Around the United States](#) resource to learn more about the kinship navigator programs discussed below and their promising practices shared during the convenings:

- ▶ **Serve all kinship/grandfamilies regardless of child welfare involvement.**
 - Kinship navigator programs in **Florida, Maine, Montana, Ohio, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wyoming** serve both families inside and families outside the child welfare system.
 - In **Alaska**, kinship navigation is available to all families in 15 communities, including tribal communities.
- ▶ **Authentically engage caregivers as part of kinship navigator programs.**
 - Many kinship navigator programs emphasize the need to have caregivers serve as navigators because of the value of obtaining support from someone who has walked in the same shoes.
 - [Foster Kinship](#), which operates **Nevada's** kinship navigator program, also has caregivers on its board of directors. All its trainings are created and facilitated by kin/grandfamily caregivers for kin/grandfamily caregivers.
- ▶ **Learn from a common model of practice and evaluation for kinship navigator service provision.**
 - The **Maine, Montana, Vermont, and Wyoming** kinship navigator programs have joined together as the Kinship Navigator Collaborative, coordinated by Generations United, Casey Family Programs, and the University of Washington, to develop, implement, and evaluate a common practice model serving all kinship/grandfamilies, regardless of child welfare involvement. The goal is to meet the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse's evidence-based standards, so these programs can receive ongoing 50 percent federal reimbursement for all costs.

Outreach and Engagement

For many organizations providing direct services to kinship/grandfamilies, outreach to the families and continued engagement of families are significant challenges. Distrust of the systems and a lack of awareness of available programs and services are among the

root causes of these challenges. The following are promising practices shared during the convenings that focus on reaching and engaging kinship/grandfamilies:

- ▶ **Use ads on radio, social media, etc. to reach families.**
 - The [Pennsylvania KinConnector](#) kinship navigator program has been successful in reaching kinship/grandfamilies through social media advertisements and internet searches. Although the program is not permitted to have its own social media accounts, it pays to advertise on Instagram and Facebook to reach families. Pennsylvania KinConnector has also found that paying to be at the top of a Google search makes a big difference in reaching families.
- ▶ **Expand advertisement by collaborating with other community programs, field professionals, and state agencies.**
 - **Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe** is one of several tribes that operate kinship navigator programs in Washington. They shared that they conduct personal outreach to families, working with child welfare staff for referrals.
- ▶ **Engage caregivers in advisory councils and other similar committees to inform the development of programs and services.**
 - **Michigan** formed a [Kinship Advisory Council](#) and recruited caregivers to advise the Department of Health and Human Services on their needs.
- ▶ **Build trust with families through organizational procedures and practices that respect and value the experiences of these families.**
 - [HALOS](#) in **South Carolina** provides services where the caregiver is most comfortable and emphasizes that supports are voluntary, among other strategies.
- ▶ **Offer various options for communication and information sharing with kinship/grandfamilies.**
 - The **District of Columbia** Child and Family Services Agency [Kinship Support Program](#) offers a kin/grandfamily caregiver warmline and web-based community resource directory.
- ▶ **Adapt traditional services to incorporate cultural activities with kinship/grandfamilies supports to increase engagement.**
 - **Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe** offers several cultural activities where they facilitate discussions with kin/grandfamily caregivers about challenges they face and explore solutions.

Housing

Kin/grandfamily caregivers often begin caring for children suddenly, and they face unique housing problems. See the [Generations United 2019 State of Grandfamilies Report: A Place to Call Home](#) to learn more. The following are promising practices shared during the convenings to help kinship/grandfamilies obtain stable housing:

- ▶ **Develop dedicated kinship/grandfamilies housing with services onsite.**
 - Plaza West in the **District of Columbia**, [Bridge Meadows](#) in **Oregon**, and [Grandparent Family Apartments](#) in **New York** offer kinship/grandfamily housing with supportive services onsite.
- ▶ **Develop housing programs specifically to support populations that disproportionately live in kinship/grandfamilies.**
 - The [Native American Youth and Family Center \(NAYA\)](#) has multiple affordable housing developments to reduce and prevent homelessness.
 - At least 18 tribal kinship/grandfamily housing programs already exist around the country, including Ilip Tilixam in Grand Ronde, Oregon.

Income Supports and Benefits

Financial challenges are often a major struggle for caregivers who did not plan or expect to raise a child. The following are promising practices shared during the convenings to help kinship/grandfamilies access benefits and reach financial stability:

- ▶ **Offer good cause exemptions to child support mandates for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).**
 - **Massachusetts** grants good cause exemptions to all kin/grandfamily caregivers applying for TANF child-only grants.
- ▶ **Provide financial assistance to kinship/grandfamily homes that are not licensed foster homes.**
 - In [Nebraska](#), all caregivers of children in the legal custody of the child welfare system, whether licensed or not, receive the same monthly payment.
 - In the **District of Columbia**, the [Grandparent Caregiver Program and Close Relative Caregiver Program](#) offer monthly subsidies for low-income caregivers outside the child welfare system.
 - The **Illinois** [Extended Family Caregiver Support Program](#) has a limited cash assistance program to assist kinship/grandfamilies in meeting the

basic needs of the relative child in their home. Cash assistance is available for expenses like legal counsel for probate court, court fees, and basic goods and services.

- **Oklahoma** uses state funds to provide emergency assistance to kinship/grandfamilies going through the foster home licensing process.
 - **Tennessee's [Relative Caregiver Program](#)** provides unlicensed relative caregivers with emergency financial and/or start-up assistance to help them obtain items such as mattresses, clothing, and school supplies.
- ▶ **Help caregivers make informed choices about becoming licensed foster parents and decrease barriers for caregivers to get licensed so they have increased access to financial resources.**
- **Colorado** has a [side-by-side chart](#), under the Kinship Foster Care and Non-Certified Kinship Care Comparison tab on their website, comparing services and benefits for caregivers based on whether they are licensed or non-licensed. Colorado also has a Kinship Foster Care Task Group designed to reduce barriers to kin/grandfamily caregivers becoming certified/licensed.
 - A national [resource](#) developed by ABA Center on Children and the Law, Generations United, and Children's Defense Fund provides information on caregivers' basic options, including licensure for those caregivers raising children in the legal custody of child welfare.
- ▶ **Hire staff to assist families in applying for benefits and other services.**
- Tribes that administer their own TANF programs have flexibility in the way they develop programs and services. For example, one tribe is creating a kinship ombudsman to help families access and navigate services.

Education and Healthcare

Many school and healthcare policies are geared towards “nuclear” families and can pose obstacles for kinship/grandfamilies, especially those outside the child welfare system and with no legal ties. The following are promising practices shared during the convenings to ensure kinship/grandfamilies can access the fundamental services of education and healthcare:

- ▶ **Establish education and healthcare consent and authorization laws for caregivers and youth in kinship/grandfamilies.**
 - An **Arizona [statute](#)** allows homeless minors to obtain hospital, medical, and surgical care.

- **California** has the [Caregiver’s Authorization Affidavit](#) to enable enrollment of a minor in school and school-related medical care.
 - **Washington’s** [Kinship Caregiver’s Declaration of Responsibility for a Minor’s Health Care](#) form allows caregivers to consent to medical, dental, and mental health care for the relative children in their care.
 - Generations United has created a [summary](#) of these types of laws.
- ▶ **Effectively use the federal McKinney Vento Act to help kin/grandfamily caregivers enroll children in school.**
- **Indiana** has an [Unaccompanied Youth Eligibility Flowchart](#) to determine whether a student qualifies as an “unaccompanied youth” under this law.
 - **Washington** state effectively uses [McKinney Vento](#) to get children in the care of “informal” kin/grandfamily caregivers enrolled in school and to provide access to services and support.

Legal Services

Legal issues are frequently among the top concerns for kinship/grandfamilies, particularly for those outside the child welfare system. The process for obtaining a legal relationship with the child—through adoption, legal custody, or guardianship—is usually expensive and time-consuming, and it can be disruptive to family dynamics. The following are promising practices shared during the convenings to support kin/grandfamily caregivers in establishing a legal relationship to the child in their care:

- ▶ **Create programs and hire staff to help guide kin/grandfamily caregivers through the legal process.**
- The **Illinois** [Extended Family Caregiver Support Program](#) provides help to caregivers in obtaining guardianship outside of child welfare involvement.
 - **Colorado** has a [Kinship Adoption Program](#) that helps kinship/grandfamilies without an active child welfare case adopt the children in their care, focusing on children ages 2-18. It is a pro-bono program in partnership with a private law office.
 - **Washington** has a [state-funded kinship legal aid coordinator](#).
- ▶ **Offer an array of legal relationship options that support family wellness and permanency for caregivers and children in kinship/grandfamilies.**
- The **Sitka Tribe’s** Dual Guardianship Program recognizes that dual guardians—for example, an auntie and a grandfather—don’t have to live in the same state or city. This strategy can reduce the exhaustion that

some guardians can experience and increase a child's sense of permanency.

Other Key Takeaways

▶ Child-Only SNAP

- **Minnesota** has a [Family Investment Program](#) that offers a child-only Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in combination with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It is a long-time program that is offered through a waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Network will be researching whether other states can obtain such a waiver.

▶ Utilize the [CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) to identify youth cared for by kinship/grandfamilies and foster families.

- Information on this survey can be found on the [CDC website](#).
- **Washington** has added the following three questions to their state Youth Risk Behavior survey and consequently gathered useful information about youth in the care of kin:
 1. Who did you live with most of the time in the **last 30 days**?
 - a. Parent(s), step-parent(s), or legal guardian
 - b. Relatives like a grandparent, an aunt, or an older brother--- but NOT your parents
 - c. Foster care parent(s)
 - d. Adults who are not your parents, relatives, or foster parents
 - e. Friends of yours with no adults present
 - f. On your own
 - g. Other
 2. Where did you live most of the time in the **last 30 days**?
 - a. In a house or apartment that my family rents or owns
 - b. In a house or apartment that a relative rents or owns
 - c. In a house or apartment with someone who is not a relative
 - d. In a shelter
 - e. In a car or RV, park, or campground
 - f. In a motel/hotel
 - g. On the street
 - h. Moved from place to place
 - i. Other
 3. Are your current living arrangements the result of losing your home because your family cannot afford housing?
 - a) No

- b) Yes
- c) Not sure

Resources

To learn more about these promising practices, view the full list of [convening resources](#). The [Resource Library](#) on the Network's website, www.GKSNetwork.org, houses the PowerPoint slides from most of the convening presentations, as well.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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