

Monthly Resource: March 2023

Making a Difference

This month, we're spotlighting two kinship programs – one run by an aging agency in Ohio and the other led by a child welfare agency in Washington – making a difference in their communities.

Extending Program Reach:

The Northwest Ohio Area Office on Aging

Arcelia Armstrong and Marsha Rose are a dynamic pair of social workers. Along with another colleague, they **are** the Kinship Navigator Program at the Northwest Ohio Area Office on Aging, and they've put together an impressive network of partnerships that greatly extends their reach.

How are grandfamily and kin caregivers referred for services? Referrals come from the YMCA, the court system, school nurses, neighbors, food banks, and places of worship. Caregivers must be residents of the County and primary caregivers of children aged 18 and under. ***There are no caregiver age, income, or legal custody requirements.***

What services are offered? The program offers referrals and assistance to help caregivers. Staff conduct an intake assessment and then follow up with each family. They update their 64-page [resource guide for all family caregivers](#) every other year, and it includes resources for kinship/grandfamilies.

How did this begin? More than two decades ago, Ohio's child welfare agency (referred to as ODJFS) made specific funds available to address the needs of kinship families. For many organizations, the end of the grant marked the end of the services. For the Northwest Ohio Area Office on Aging, it was just the beginning.

Where does ongoing funding come from? Current funding comes from the federal [National Family Caregiver Support Program](#) as well as local levies and agencies, including the county child welfare agency.

What services are grandfamily and kin caregivers referred to? Partners provide legal assistance, financial assistance, transportation, food, mental health services, childcare, education, housing, furniture, and clothing. More than 1,000 caregivers received assistance in 2022.

What are some examples of goods and services that partners donate for the families? In-kind and monetary donations cover sports tickets, camp scholarships, winter coats, school supplies, funds for farmer's market tokens, holiday hams and turkeys, and farm-fresh food delivery.

Creating a Kin-First Culture:

Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)

Washington State's child welfare agency (DCYF) is firmly committed to a kin-first culture. There's buy-in at every level, from Governor Jay Inslee (who annually designates a Kinship Caregiver Day) to the legislature (which approves state-funded programs for kinship families). Geene Delaplane, the Kinship Care and Guardianship Program Manager at DCYF, shares this passion for kin-first care. She says the driver of this work is data. "We've always believed family placement is better," Delaplane says, "and the data shows it."

How does your [website](#) set the tone for DCYF's work with kinship caregivers? There's clear guidance for the grandfamilies concerning financial assistance and the benefits of licensing, and the website is up front that it includes all kin relationships, regardless of blood connections.

Do you have programs that support the department's emphasis on keeping family together?

- ▶ The [Kinship Caregiver Engagement Unit](#) provides "concierge services" to help kin caregivers get licensed as foster parents. Families can opt to complete paperwork online or have someone come to their house and walk them through it.
- ▶ **Family Decision-Making Meetings** are led by trained mediators, who help family members identify an individual to serve as a kin foster parent. Parent preferences are heard and honored, and the result is a higher rate of sibling placements.

How are kinship families outside of foster care connected to resources? State resources for kinship families aren't limited to foster care; the State's aging and disability department (referred to as DSHS), manages the state's kinship navigator program. DSHS and DCYF have closely collaborated for years.

- ▶ The [Kinship Care](#) part of the DSHS website makes finding what families need easy. (For more, see the [Program Manual](#).)
- ▶ A new state-funded legal hotline for kin caregivers, [Legal Advice and Referral for Kinship Care \(LAARK\)](#), is free and available to families both inside and outside the foster care system.

There are many other wonderful programs for kinship/grandfamilies around the country. We will be elevating more and more this coming year, so please [visit our website](#) often!

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.

The Network is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$9,950,000 with 95 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and \$523,684 and 5 percentage funded by non-government sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

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