

Vulnerable Families:

Understanding the Needs of Kinship Caregivers
in Two Rural Counties in Western North
Carolina

2022



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1** ABOUT US
- 2** BACKGROUND
- 3** OVERVIEW
- 4** WHAT WE LEARNED
- 5** ACCESSING SERVICES
- 6** ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT US

Creating a Family is a national non-profit located in Western North Carolina. Our mission is to strengthen and inspire foster, kinship, and adoptive parents and the professionals who support them in raising children exposed to trauma, including prenatal exposure.

Our vision is that every child has a family who understands their unique gifts and challenges and is equipped to help them thrive.



STRENGTHENING AND INSPIRING

VULNERABLE FAMILIES | GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

BACKGROUND

Grandparents raising grandchildren are a vulnerable and significantly underserved population. An estimated 84,000 children in North Carolina live with kinship caregivers (primarily grandparents). Social service agencies increasingly turn first to kinship families when seeking placements for children, and many grandparents/kin step in informally before social services become involved, primarily due to substance abuse and mental illness.

We must support grandparent-led families because they form the backbone of our child welfare system, and their role will only be increasing. Children need to have supported and stable families to grow into healthy adults. Unfortunately, many of these children face additional hurdles due to neglect, parental substance abuse, and prenatal drug and alcohol exposure.

Most grandparent-led families in this region are below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (Administration for Children and Families, Region IV). While the federal Family First Prevention Services Act encourages placement of foster children with kin, it does not require that these families receive the same parent training and financial support as licensed foster parents. Grandparent caregivers are most often grandmothers, many of whom face health and or poverty-related issues of their own. They need help accessing available services.

Organizations that work with these families agree that they have significant needs, but they also agree that they are a complex population to understand and reach. In part, this complexity is due to poverty, rural geography, lack of transportation, and the shame that often surrounds the disintegration of a family unit that results in grandparents needing to step into the parenting role.

OVERVIEW

To better serve kinship caregivers and understand their needs, Creating a Family hosted a stakeholder meeting and six listening sessions for kinship caregivers in two counties in Western North Carolina – Transylvania and Henderson Counties. The goal was to identify needs and service gaps for kinship families and collaborate as stakeholders to meet these needs.

Transylvania County

- Population 32,986
- 14.3% live below poverty line (national average is 12.3%)
- 54% children receive free or reduced-cost lunches
- Ethnicity: White (Non-Hispanic) 90.4%, Black/African American (Non-Hispanic) 4.62%, Other (Hispanic) 1.8%, Two+ (Non-Hispanic) 1.21%, and White (Hispanic) 1.2%.



Henderson County

- Population 119,251
- 10.9% live below poverty line
- 50% children receive free or reduced-cost lunches
- Ethnicity: White (Non-Hispanic) 83.1%, White (Hispanic) 8.1%, Black/African American (Non-Hispanic) 3.36%, Other (Hispanic) 1.64%, and Two+ (Non-Hispanic) 1.46%.

"I was so glad to be invited to the listening session. As this trend continues to grow, it is really comforting to know there are people like yourselves trying to brainstorm for people in my situation. Our challenges and set of circumstances are different than the younger generation having children. We are trying to figure out how to navigate through this new chapter in our lives that we didn't plan on. We have already been there and done that. However now we're doing it all over again, but we're older!!! Having the right people give information on services that can be obtained is priceless! No one owes us anything, but it is comforting that people are trying to help. You are our lifeline! It sure was nice hearing other people's stories."

-P.C.

Grandparent raising her granddaughter

1. STAKEHOLDER MEETING

Creating a Family invited 33 regional organizations that provide services to kinship families. The goal for the Stakeholder Meeting was to identify needs and service gaps that organizations see and the challenges they face in meeting these needs.

Organizations in attendance represented various services that interact with kinship families, including mental/behavioral health providers, pediatricians, family resource services, school counselors, social workers, after-school programs, preschool programs/child development, and the Department of Social Services.



One of the things we have seen is that they see a lot of faces and they forget who goes with what program. It is hard to keep up with all the avenues. They need one face to be their ally. It is overwhelming to have so many people in your life.

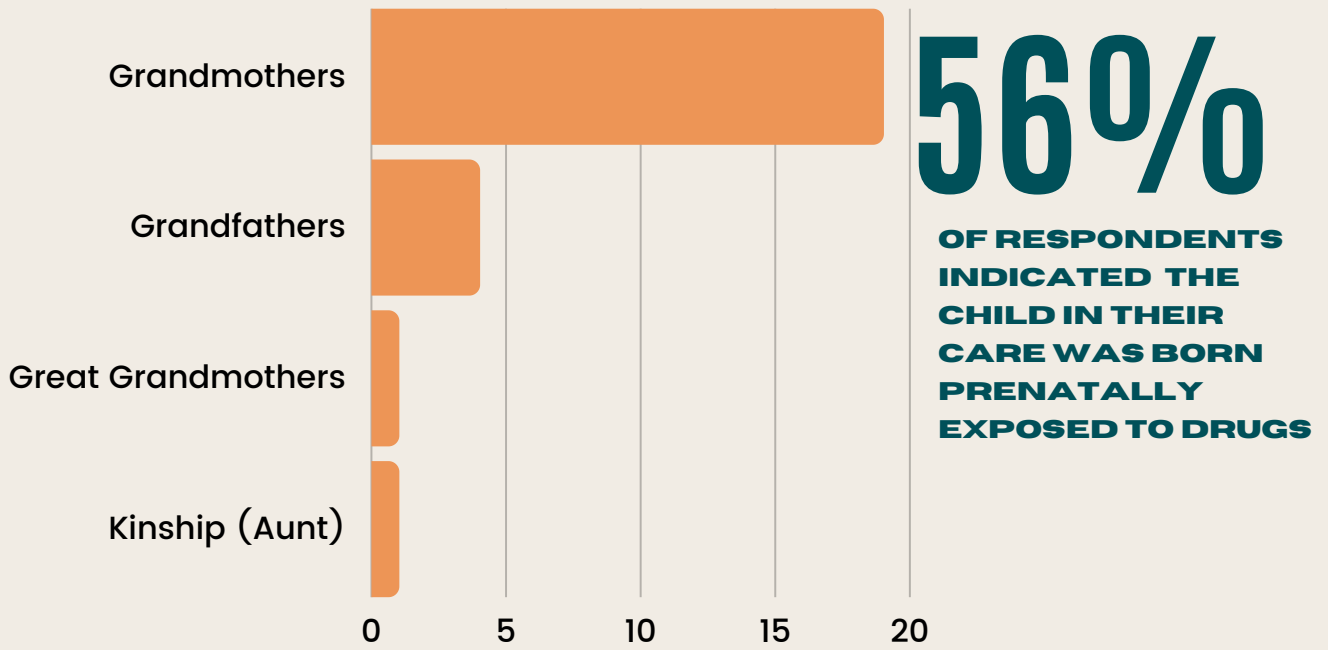
- Olivia Shuler, Transylvania County DSS

2. LISTENING SESSIONS

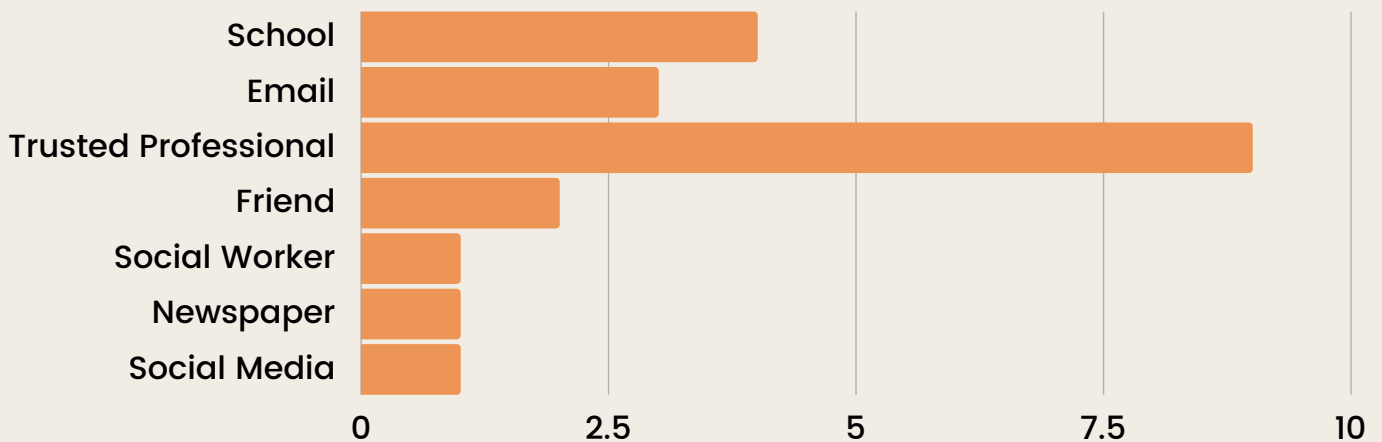
We facilitated six listening sessions for kinship caregivers--four in Transylvania County and two in Henderson County. To ensure that participants represented the diversity of the counties, we held sessions in geographically dispersed areas in each county and in a variety of settings (church/after-school program serving the black community, school, YMCA, and 3 family resource centers). We advertised the listening sessions through articles and ads in the two local newspapers, social media, and local radio stations. We also created handouts (both print and digital) for school social workers/counselors and allied professionals to help get the word out to families. At each session, to encourage attendance, we provided a BBQ meal, childcare, and a \$25 gift card for each participant.

LISTENING SESSION ATTENDEES

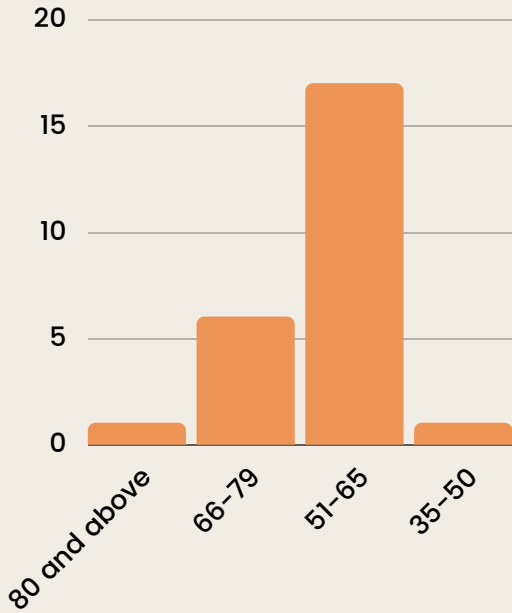
We interviewed 25 caregivers about their experience raising their grandchild or other relatives. The breakdown below represents their relationship to the child in their care.



HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE SESSIONS?

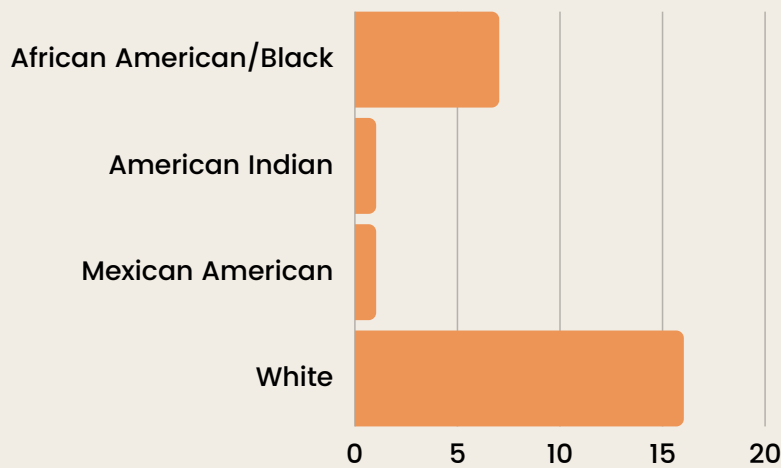


AGE OF ATTENDEES



*“I AM 78
YEARS
OLD.
HOW CAN
I RAISE
THEM?”*

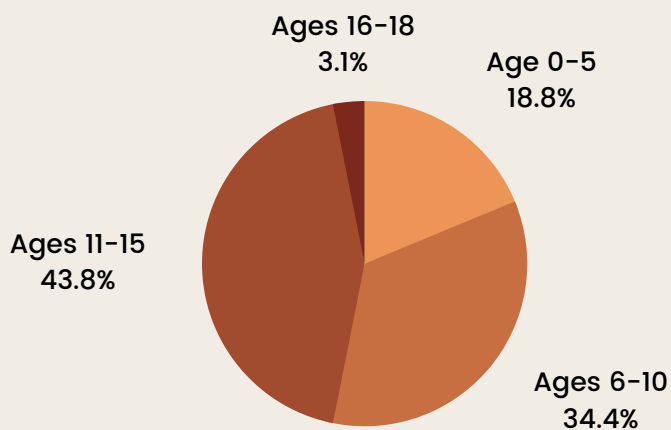
RACE OF ATTENDEES



A.M.



AGE OF CHILDREN IN CARE



"The biggest blessing for me is peace! When they are with me, I know they are safe and loved."

"Grandparents have no rights. If the parents want to, they can just come and take the kids away even when they aren't safe. And parents know this and use this to threaten us grandparents."

"They give my life purpose and a reason to get up in the morning."

"I really struggled when I first got them. I was angry. This was our time and all of a sudden, we have a 6-year-old. I'm 60 and I don't have the energy. I no longer have freedom to take off and go somewhere. "

"I can't help but play the "how old will I be when" game even though it is not helpful. I'll be 79 when she graduates."

"When I went to get my grandson, my neighbors saw me putting a car seat in my truck. They asked what was going on. When I came back they had come together and provided everything I needed for him. I cried."

"I remind myself that it's not his fault. He just has crappy parents and I worry that may be my fault."

"I am working through the levels of grief for the life I once had."

WHAT WE LEARNED

FROM STAKEHOLDERS

CHALLENGES

- Lack of Engagement
- Resistance to Help
- Energy Mismatch
- Fear of Technology
- Discipline
- Resources
- Competing Demands
- COVID Anxiety
- Enabling Adult Child
- Lack of Support
- Resentment (of both kids and parents)
- Lack Parenting Models
- Lack Education
- Cultural Barriers to Accepting Help

PERCEIVED NEEDS

- Food, Clothing, Furnishings
- Money
- Child Care
- Respite
- Transportation
- Understanding Legal Options
- Baby Supplies
- Summer Camps
- After-school Care
- Mentors for Children
- Employment
- Mental Health
- Emotional Support
- Connecting to Other Grandparents
- Safe Housing
- Laundry
- Academic Support
- Self-care
- Medical Care
- Parenting Support
- Money Management
- Substance Abuse
- Accessing Resources
- Relationship with the Children's Bio Parents
- Prenatal Exposure – Understanding the Impacts

"These grandparents have so much on their plates. It is very difficult for them to prioritize. They are just putting out fires."

- Sarah Hatch, Care Manager for VAYA Health

"It took a long time to find effective resources. We wound up using the mobile crisis line several times, but it is no longer a crisis by the time they come out. Finding help is a major issue."

-J.

WHAT WE LEARNED

FROM KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

BIGGEST BLESSINGS

- Laughter, Love, Hugs
- Reason to Get Up/Staying Busy
- Giving Purpose in Life
- Knowing They are Safe/Not Worrying
- Renewed Perspective of the World and Learning From Them
- Seeing Their Growth and Healing
- Not Being Alone



*"I feel isolated. None of our friends are raising a 5-year-old."
-S.F.*

*"I don't have childcare so I have to go to the grocery store with 3 young children."
-J.*

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

- Lack of Energy/Exhaustion
- Too Old-Fear of the Future
- No Legal Permanency-Fear That Parents Will Take Child Away
- Not Knowing What Resources are Available
- Child-care
- Loss of Freedom/Can't Retire/Altered Social Life
- Early Childhood Trauma/Prenatal Exposure
- Anger, Depression, Isolation, Grief
- Legal Expense/Financial Stress
- Self-care – No Time to Myself
- Dealing with Their Bad Days
- Not Being Able to Sleep

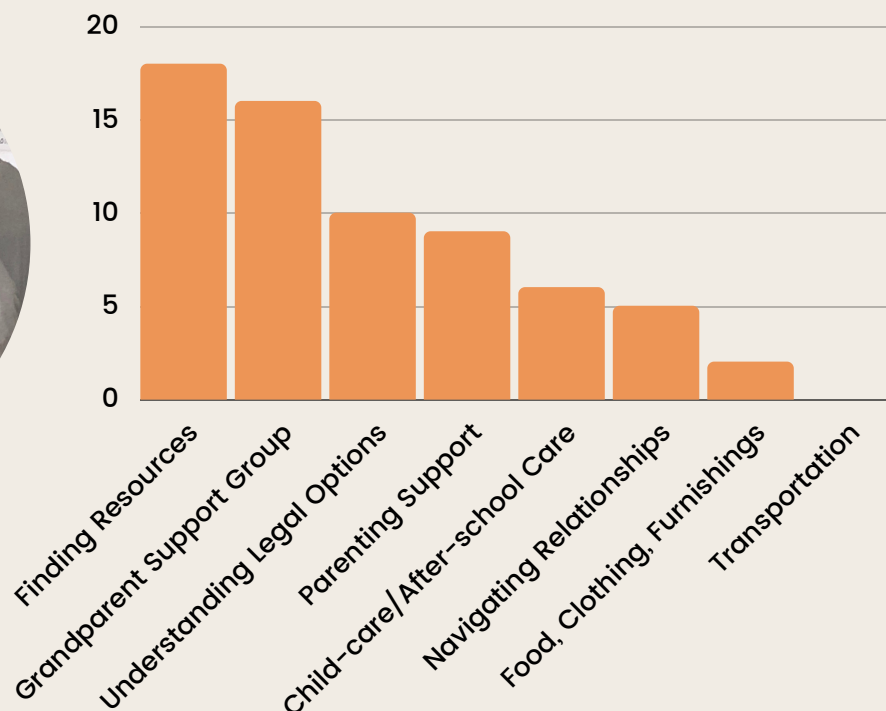
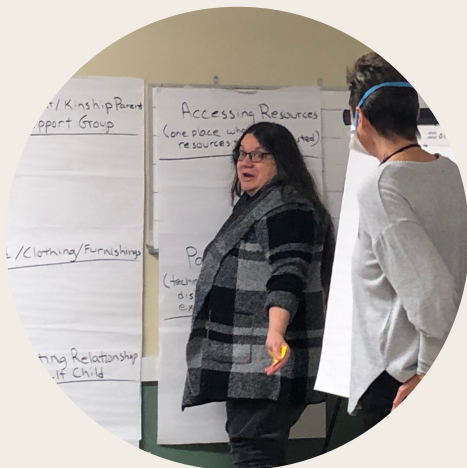
WHAT WE LEARNED

FROM KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

GREATEST NEEDS

Large sheets of paper were attached to the wall at the end of each listening session, one for each of the following areas of need. Participants were given three sticky notes and asked to rank their three greatest areas of need.

- Understanding Legal Options
- Parenting Support (technology/phones/social media, discipline, prenatal exposure, trauma)
- Finding Resources—One Place Where All Resources, Financial Aid, Services Would Be Listed
- Child-care/After-school Care/Summer Care
- Help Navigating Relationship with Adult Child (child's parent)
- Transportation
- Food, Clothing, Furnishings
- Support Group with Other Grandparents



— “ —————

Physically I'm exhausted. And my grandbaby is getting bigger and heavier. I wish I could be his grandma instead of his mom.

-T.

————— ” —

— “ —————

The one thing I've learned is that the kids want to love and be loved by their parents. They are going to stick by mom and dad even if they aren't good to them.

-S.C.

————— ” —

"Between all the therapies and appointments for him, I haven't even been to the doctor for myself or to get a haircut. "

-T.S.

ACCESSING SERVICES

HOW DO YOU FIND/ACCESS SERVICES

FROM KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

- Google/Online Search
- Neighbors and Friends
- Guardian Ad Litem
- Pediatrician
- School Social Worker/Counselor
- Word of Mouth
- Trusted Professional
- Family Resource Centers
- Parenting Support Groups
- Facebook Community Groups

Participants were specifically asked if they were comfortable accessing information online. The vast majority said they had access to the internet, were comfortable using it, and relied on it as a source of information.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"There is no one-stop location or navigator to help make the connections needed for grandparents and children to be successful. It isn't always easy for families to access the various resources they need."

*-Jamie Wiener, Executive Director
Children & Family Resource Center*

- Shame
- General Lack of Trust of Institutions and Services
- Lack of Time to Engage in Resources
- Fear That DSS Will Take the Kids Away
- Resentment of Challenges They are Experiencing
- No Central Place to Access Resources
- They See Many Faces and Forget Who Goes With What Program
- Technology Challenges - No Email, Don't Engage Electronically
- Lack of Connection to Services
- No Child-care
- Overwhelmed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING PARTNERS FOR
THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT**

Lake Toxaway CHARITIES

Lake Toxaway Charities' mission is to support the charities, medical outreach, and educators who work with and minister to the abused, disabled, indigent, and those with special needs in Transylvania County.



Hunter Hometown Foundation was created to inspire others in the automotive industry through action and to increase regional philanthropy. They support youth and education, preserving the environment, and promoting animal rescue.



AARP empowers people to choose how they live as they age. They strive to understand local community needs and provide support and assistance. They do this through their initiatives, programs, partnerships and advocacy efforts to improve quality of life and promote livability, equity and justice for all ages. Stay tuned to the news in the Mountain Region at www.aarp.org/mountainnc



Since Robert P. Ingle opened his first store in 1963, Ingles Markets has been committed to the communities in which they serve. This tradition of giving continues at Ingles today.

CONTACT CREATING A FAMILY

CREATINGAFAMILY.ORG | INFO@CREATINGAFAMILY.ORG
(828)862-8200