

Kinship Navigator Program



Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio (AOoA)

The Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc. (AOoA) has a Kinship Navigator Program that helps grandparents and relatives care better and longer for the children they raise. This program has served as a primary support to kin caregivers in Lucas County, Ohio for more than 23 years. In 2000, the Kinship Navigator Program grew out of a statewide initiative by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services that sought to address the rising need for support for kinship families. Since, then, through strong local collaboration among the directors of the county's aging, child welfare, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies, the Kinship Navigator Program at AOoA has been supporting kin caregivers and the children they raise.

The AOoA promotes the health, well-being, and safety of older adults, persons with disabilities, and family caregivers to foster independence. The Kinship Navigator Program contributes to this mission by helping kin caregivers of all ages access vital resources for themselves and the children in their care to promote stability and permanency. Their success is a result of diverse partnerships, effective cross-system collaboration, and compassionate rapport-building with families, among other strengths. As a result, the Kinship Navigator Program at AOoA has earned the Exemplary Kinship Program designation from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network.

Eligibility for Services and Intake

To receive services from the Kinship Navigator Program, kin caregivers do not need to meet any requirements based on age, income, or legal or familial relationship to the child. The program serves both kin caregivers who are raising children in the custody of child welfare and those who are not under child welfare custody. Kin caregivers must be residents of Lucas County, they must be raising a child aged 18 or younger, and the birth parent of the child cannot be living with the child or kin caregiver.

Kin caregivers who contact the Kinship Navigator Program are offered a welcome packet, which includes a welcome letter, the Kinship Navigator Program's resource

guide, a guide on public benefits from Lucas County Job and Family Services, mental health resources, and information about additional resources customized to the kin caregiver's needs.

Kinship Navigator Program staff assess each kin caregiver's needs at least twice. The first assessment occurs at intake, using a form developed by the agency called the [Kinship Caregiver Needs Assessment](#). A second assessment occurs four to six weeks later, addressing the kin caregiver's satisfaction with the resources and referrals they may have received from the program, obstacles that may have arisen since initial intake, the kin caregiver's stress level, and new needs.



Photo Courtesy of the Kinship Navigator Program

Service Population

The Kinship Navigator Program provides services and supports to over 1,300 families in Lucas County, Ohio. While they have seen caregivers as young as 20 years old and up to 80 years old, most of their clients are 45 to 64 years old. Clients are largely women (89%). Half of all clients identify as African American and 39% identify as white.

Services

The Kinship Navigator Program offers over a dozen services, such as information and referral, education and enrichment programming (including respite), and tangible goods.

Information and Referral

Kinship Navigator Program staff provide information, referral, and assistance to caregivers via telephone, email, and/or mail, as needed. Staff providing information and referral services will:

- ▶ Help kin caregivers identify and prioritize their needs and determine short-term and long-term goals.
- ▶ Inform kin caregivers of community resources to assist caregivers in securing necessary benefits and services.
- ▶ Refer kin caregivers to critical supports such as childcare, support groups, medical coverage, child support collection, housing, legal services, furniture,

beds/bedding, tutoring, financial assistance, behavioral counseling, resources for children with disabilities, and respite.

- As needed, staff provide warm hand-offs (direct connections between the kin caregiver and the service to which they are being referred). For example, the Kinship Navigator Program is an approved referral agency for a local food bank program called SeaGate Food Bank Families In Recovery Sticking Together (FIRST). When a kin caregiver is caregiving due to a parental substance use disorder and needs food assistance, the Kinship Navigator Program makes a FIRST referral and mails a FIRST voucher to the kin caregiver every month. Kin caregivers use the vouchers to pick up a food box at SeaGate Food Bank once per month (twice per month during holiday months). Kin caregivers remain enrolled in the FIRST program until they ask to be removed or are no longer caregiving.

Education/Enrichment

The Kinship Navigator Program offers various opportunities for kin caregivers to gain useful information and connect with peers.

▶ Kinship Club Meetings and Kinship Let's Talk Support

- The program conducts three Kinship Club Meetings and three Kinship Let's Talk Support Groups each year. At these meetings, caregivers can connect with others in a similar caregiving situation; gain coping skills to mitigate stress; increase their knowledge and skills in areas such as parenting, child development, and community resources; and strengthen relationships with the children in their care.

▶ Educational Workshops

- The six-day Summer Series covers topics like education, mental health, permanency support, legal issues, wellness, and self-care.
- The Wellness Initiative for Senior Education (WISE) is an evidence-based curriculum helping older adults increase their knowledge and awareness of issues related to health and the aging process.
- The Child Traumatic Stress Workshop is an evidence-based curriculum helping kin caregivers learn about the impact of trauma on the development and behavior of children.
- Mental Health Education, in honor of national Mental Health Awareness Month in May, helps kin caregivers learn about local mental health resources available to children and adults to support family resiliency.

- The program offers youth workshops or programming during the Summer Series and during quarterly caregiver programs.

▶ **Respite**

- During in-person workshops and events, kin caregivers can access onsite respite provided by childcare workers who care for children and youth while kin caregivers participate in activities. The Kinship Navigator Program hires the childcare workers and secures additional support through the [AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP Program](#).

Tangible Goods

“[I] don’t know what I would do without [resources obtained through the program].”

– Kin Caregiver

▶ **Drive-Through Events**

- Through donations from various community organizations, the Kinship Navigator Program distributes much-needed items, such as school supplies, winter clothing, holiday meals, event tickets, and more, directly to kinship families. The program distributes many of these tangible goods through drive-through events where families can pick up items on a scheduled date and time, but families may also have the opportunity to receive tangible goods during in-person workshops and events.



Photo Courtesy of the Kinship Navigator Program

▶ **Quarterly Resiliency Raffle**

- To help encourage and strengthen resilience in kinship/grandfamilies, the program holds a quarterly resiliency raffle. Caregivers receive a raffle ticket, automatically entering them into the raffle, each time they attend a

kinship educational program or support group and submit their program evaluation form. Community partners and local businesses provide raffle items like bath and body care kits, mindfulness workbooks, and smartwatches, all of which build the caregiver’s resiliency toolbox.

Outreach

The Kinship Navigator Program utilizes several tools and methods for outreach, including:

- ▶ At least two community presentations and/or information fairs each month.
- ▶ Virtual presentations.
- ▶ Targeted mailings sent to caregivers, funders, and community partners.
- ▶ Media interviews for television, radio, podcasts, newspapers, and magazines.
- ▶ Advertisements via radio, television, and newspaper and other print publications.
- ▶ AOoA and community partner websites.
- ▶ AOoA and community partner social media, e.g., Facebook, YouTube, X (previously named Twitter), etc.

Staff use various outreach tools to both communicate with existing clients and reach new caregivers to serve. A quarterly newsletter is available to kinship families involved in the program, and it is also sent to approximately 300 agencies, schools, libraries, community organizations, and others via email to reach and engage new families in program services. The Kinship Navigator Program also distributes its Parenting Smarts Resource Guide (linked below) to kin caregivers, schools, various social service agencies, healthcare settings, etc.

The program has seen significant increases in referrals, going from 75 in 2022 to 242 in 2023, a 223% increase.

“They come through whenever you call.”

– Kin Caregiver

Staff

Three staff members at the AOoA operate and provide day-to-day oversight of the program– the kinship navigator, the kinship navigator program supervisor, and the coordinator of caregiver support and kinship programs. The supervisor and coordinator are licensed social workers in the state of Ohio. The team has over 60 years of combined clinical experience in social services. A program staff member noted, “Kinship

Navigator Program staff are experienced and well respected in the community for their work with kinship families.” At least once a year, AOoA staff participate in trainings that emphasize cultural competence, bias reduction, and inclusion.

Key Partners

Two key partners of the program are Lucas County Children Services (LCCS), the county child welfare agency, and Lucas County Department of Job and Family Services (LCDJFS), the county Temporary Assistance for Needy Families agency, with which the Kinship Navigator Program has contractual agreements. LCCS is the AOoA Kinship Navigator Program’s primary funder, refers families to the program, and has presented information during kinship educational programs. LCDJFS monitors the program.

In addition, the Kinship Navigator Program has more than 75 community partners that provide in-kind support and/or pro-bono services to kinship families, including:

- ▶ **Buckeye Health Plan (Medicaid)** – has presented information during educational programming and provides in-kind donations such as holiday food, backpacks and tote bags for school supplies, and raffle items for kin caregivers.
- ▶ **Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc.** – has presented for kinship educational programming and can provide free legal representation to kin caregivers.
- ▶ **Lucas County Child Support Services and Juvenile Court** – presents educational programming on child support and other legal matters.
- ▶ **Lucas County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)** – shares the program’s Parenting Smarts Resource Guide and makes referrals to the program.
- ▶ **Margaret Hunt Senior Center** – provides space free of charge for support groups; workshops; the distribution of school supplies, coats, and holiday meals to kinship/grandfamilies; and the storage of concrete goods.
- ▶ **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Greater Toledo** – presents on mental health topics during kinship educational programming and conducts an interactive mental health art program called Creative Expressions.
- ▶ **SeaGate Food Bank** – provides food monthly to kinship families referred by the program.
- ▶ **Toledo Public Schools** – provides space at a high school to host the Summer Series programming and has presented during kinship educational programming. The Kinship Navigator Program provides training to school staff on grandfamilies.

Program partners praised the Kinship Navigator Program’s resource guide, communication efforts, and collaborative spirit. One partner said that she appreciates “who [the Kinship Navigator Program] can bring to the table.” Multiple partners praised the Kinship Navigator Program’s “strong leadership” and their work with underserved communities. Partners additionally appreciated that Kinship Navigator Program staff reach out when they need help.

“[The training the Kinship Navigator Program offers] fills my internal gaps”

– Partner

The Kinship Navigator Program also collaborates with other internal AOoA programs, like the AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP Program. AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP Program volunteers support the Kinship Navigator Program by assembling welcome packets and preparing mailings of letters, flyers, announcements, and Parenting Smarts Resource Guides. They also assist with hands-on childcare and activities for kinship children and youth during in-person kinship events, and they help with the distribution of donated items, such as school supplies, winter coats, and holiday meals, to kin caregivers.

Caregiver Engagement

The Kinship Navigator Program encourages and receives feedback and input from the kin caregivers they serve through surveys, emails, and in-person or phone conversations. The program distributes a [satisfaction survey](#) to all kin caregiver clients biannually, as part of its contractual agreement with LCCS and LCDJFS. Kin caregivers who participate in educational workshops and/or support group meetings also receive program evaluation surveys at the conclusion of each session. All client satisfaction surveys can be completed anonymously by mail or online. The program mails the biannual satisfaction surveys with return envelopes that are Business Reply postage paid, so there is no cost to the kin caregiver.



Photo Courtesy of the Kinship Navigator Program

Funding and Sustainability

The Kinship Navigator Program’s primary funding source is Lucas County Children Services (LCCS). In addition to the funds it receives from LCCS, the Kinship Navigator Program also receives ongoing funding from the Lucas County Department of Job and

Family Services, the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) under the Older Americans Act, and the Lucas County Senior Service tax levy.

The Northwest Ohio Area Office on Aging Foundation also helps fund the gap between those who qualify for services from other funding sources and those who do not. For example, the Foundation provides funding to support services and assistance for families in which the kin caregivers are under 55 years old and therefore do not qualify for supports from the NFCSP. One way the Foundation has done this is by providing funding to the Kinship Navigator Program for holiday meals for kinship/grandfamilies.

Additional financial and in-kind supports come from numerous community partners.

Demonstrating Success and Continuing Quality Improvement

Kinship Navigator Program staff collect, track, and analyze data received from client satisfaction surveys, program evaluation surveys, intake needs assessments, and follow-up assessments. The program also reports all of the surveys and assessments to LCDJFS, which monitors them.

The Kinship Navigator Program's quarterly performance measures include the following goals:

- ▶ **Information and referral:** in assessment and follow-up, staff will make new caregivers aware of community resources.
- ▶ **Education, enrichment, and respite:** staff will provide caregivers and children with opportunities to attend groups that provide respite for the adults and that provide programming which caregivers will evaluate as informative and useful.
- ▶ **Outreach and communication:** staff will raise awareness in the community about kinship families and the services and resources available to kin caregivers.
- ▶ **Foster care placement:** staff will raise awareness in the community about how kin caregivers reduce the likelihood of children being placed in foster care.
- ▶ **Impact of services:** the program will reduce the likelihood of children entering the foster care system and make a positive impact in the lives of kin caregivers and the children they care for.

The program collects data on the quarterly performance measures through a database, Wellsky, and an evaluation tool, SurveyMonkey, which includes responses from initial intake needs assessments, follow-up assessments, program evaluation surveys, and

biannual customer satisfaction surveys. Staff track service deliveries and caregiver demographics through the WellSky database and on supplemental Excel spreadsheets.

Program partners interviewed by the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network noted that the Kinship Navigator Program routinely meets performance measures, submits their reports on time, and appears to be continually seeking to improve their program. When asked, one partner stated that, in their monitoring of the Kinship Navigator Program, they have not found any financial issues.

When asked how they use data from the kin caregiver surveys to modify services, staff replied that other than adding suggested workshop topics, they have never needed to make significant changes because the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Challenges and Areas for Program Improvement and Growth

Staff, partners, and kin caregivers all identified funding as a challenge. Staff noted that they would like to increase their services, the number of families served, and agency capacity, but they need more funding to do so. Caregivers mentioned that they would like to have access to financial supports and would also like to be more engaged in fundraising. Additionally, the program could benefit from increasing the number of survey responses they receive from caregivers.

Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network staff would also recommend that the program explore ways to further engage kin caregivers in the development and implementation of program services, such as by hiring staff that have lived experience as kin caregivers or creating a kinship advisory council to help guide service delivery. Learn more about engaging kinship/grandfamilies in one of our resources, [Tips to Include Kinship/Grandfamilies in Programmatic Decision-Making](#).

Lessons Learned

Staff highlighted the importance of targeted outreach to increase awareness about the program and to build community partnerships. Targeted outreach across sectors should engage government agencies, including (but not limited to) child welfare, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and courts; non-profit organizations; for-profit companies; schools; and other local institutions and offices (such as pediatricians).

Additional Program Resources

- ▶ [Program flyer](#)
- ▶ [Program website](#)

- ▶ [Outreach bookmark](#)
- ▶ [Kinship Program Evaluation Survey](#)
- ▶ [Parenting Smarts Resource Guide, 10th Edition](#)
- ▶ [Quarterly Newsletter- Winter 2023-2024](#)
- ▶ [Kinship Caregiver Needs Assessment](#)
- ▶ [Kinship Caregiver Follow-up Assessment](#)
- ▶ [Biannual Customer Satisfaction Survey](#)

Learn More about the Network's Exemplary Designation

Network staff, along with staff of a partner organization, participated in a site visit to this program and are available to answer questions based on this summary. Please complete this short [form](#) and we will get back to you.

For information about the steps and criteria of the exemplary designation process, please click [here](#).

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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