

Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program



University of Tennessee Health Science Center Center on Developmental Disabilities

The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program has supported kinship/grandfamilies for over 20 years. In 2000, the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation allowing for the development of relative caregiver programs, allocating four million dollars to support three programs in Tennessee, including the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program, for a two-year pilot project. Thanks to the success of the pilot, there are now eight sites across Tennessee implementing the Relative Caregiver Program.

The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program is the oldest and largest continuously operating kinship/grandfamily program in the state. It is located on the campus of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC), in Memphis, Tennessee, and administratively supported through the UTHSC Center on Developmental Disabilities (CDD). This collaboration supports families' access to information on wellness and an extensive center dedicated to improving the quality of life of children and adults with disabilities.

The program's overarching goal is to help families maintain stability so children can remain in the care of their kin. They accomplish this goal through a vast array of services and supports such as youth mentoring, financial assistance, and concrete goods. The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program's unique services, driven staff, committed partnerships, and the relationships that staff members have been able to build with the families all contribute to their exemplary designation.

Eligibility for Services

The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program serves kinship families who are involved in child welfare and those who are not. Services vary slightly depending on child welfare involvement. Any relative caregiver can participate in support groups, but to be eligible for other program services, such as case management, a family must meet four criteria:

- ▶ The caregiver must be related to the child by blood, marriage, or adoption.

- ▶ The caregiver must have an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- ▶ The birth parents cannot be present in the home.
- ▶ The family must agree to participate in a home visit.

The Relative Caregiver Stipend Program has additional criteria:

- ▶ The child cannot be in child welfare custody.
- ▶ The relative must be 21 years of age or older.
- ▶ The relative must agree to seek the establishment and enforcement of child support.

Caregivers can be referred from other agencies and organizations or self-refer. The program has a one-page [referral form](#). Once a caregiver is referred, a staff person makes an initial phone call to determine eligibility, followed by a home visit. A staff member will use the Relative Caregiver [Family Needs Scale](#) and a home safety checklist to assess the needs and safety of the home. They will also create a home safety plan with families, as needed. After the initial intake is complete, a staff member will gather relevant information and resources to share with the kin caregiver.

Service Population

The program serves families residing in Shelby County, Tennessee. Shelby County is the westernmost and largest county in terms of geography and population in the state. Memphis, the county seat, is the second largest city in Tennessee. The program serves roughly 230 children every year. A large majority of families served are African American (95%) and the average age of the primary kin caregiver is approximately 55. Over 75% of the families served by the program live on incomes that are at or below 200% of the federal poverty level and many have multiple children in the household.



Photo Courtesy of Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program

Services

The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program provides services that promote holistic family wellness so children remain in the care and custody of their kin while maintaining stability.

Information and Referral

After assessing a client's needs using the Family Needs Scale and Home Safety Checklist, staff members provide relevant information and referrals to appropriate community programs. The program refers clients to organizations such as the Center for Youth Advocacy, for youth behavioral support, and Shelby County Community Services Agency, for financial assistance.

Case Management

The program works with the family to develop a [service plan](#) at the start of services. Monthly case management meetings between the family and the staff focus on progress on service plan goals, along with the general health and safety of the family. The staff advocates for and assists families in navigating the court system, schools, child welfare, and other systems in Tennessee. The program also informs families about benefits and support services they are eligible to receive. Families that don't receive the monthly stipend and only need temporary assistance can access case management on a short-term basis, for about one to six months.

Emergency One-Time Financial or Start-Up Assistance and Concrete Goods

The program's financial assistance and concrete goods are essential services to help the families maintain stability. Financial assistance may assist with rent/mortgage payments, utilities, childcare, and more. The program provides or connects families to basic needs such as food, clothing, rent, utilities, medicine, school supplies, and other essentials. To receive financial assistance, a family must not be receiving any other kinship payment or subsidy.

"I thought I could do it on my own. They brought beds, still makes me tear up, gently used clothes..."

– Kin Caregiver

Support Groups, Family Events, and Other Enrichment Activities

The program holds three support groups each month for caregivers – one virtually, one telephonically, and one in person in the community. The different formats promote accessibility for caregivers with different needs and availability. Support group leaders select discussion topics based on issues or concerns caregivers have identified.

"When I think about leaving Memphis, I wonder if there's a relative support group with someone like Ms. Rhonda. We're human and they treat us like we're human. The first time I heard of self-care was here. Somebody who came to talk about dental work; [the] relative caregiver program encouraged me to go."

– Kin Caregiver

The program holds Youth Empowerment Groups quarterly. They address topics such as "How to Succeed in Today's World," "Bullying," "Cyber Safety," "Teen Violence," "Positive Self-Image,"

“Teen Suicide,” and more. These enrichment activities are designed to enhance and improve the self-worth and self-esteem of both the youth and the caregivers. They offer families a safe space to enjoy each other and interact with others who have similar experiences and, in some cases, develop friendships and build a much-needed social support network. Occasionally, youth who age out of the program stay engaged by volunteering.

At least once per month, the program holds simultaneous in-person programming for both kin caregivers and children to bring peers together and to provide respite to caregivers.

Youth Mentoring and the Annual Young Men and Ladies Gala

The program offers monthly mentoring groups for relative children as well as other children in the home. An outreach coordinator and a family advocate counselor facilitate the mentoring groups, with Diersen Charities providing additional support to mentor boys. The mentoring program provides support and enrichment services that address self-esteem, abuse, self-love, and any other topics important for young people’s growth and development.

“[The boys mentoring program] saves these boys’ lives.”

– Partner

Each year, the program holds an Annual Young Men and Ladies Gala for the young people in the mentoring group. The children learn the waltz, display different talents, and show their appreciation to their caregivers. The entire formal event is free of charge to the children, the caregivers, and their families. Birth parents and extended family members are encouraged to attend the event and celebrate the children.



Photos Courtesy of Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program

Relative Caregiver Stipend Program

The stipend program began on January 1, 2023 and is state funded and administered through the Department of Children’s Services. Eligible caregivers receive a monthly stipend of \$16.88 per day for each eligible child who is in the caregiver’s court-ordered legal custody. Caregivers can receive the funds until the child turns 18, if they remain eligible for the program. Caregivers

receive payment directly via direct deposit or paper check. The state does not dictate how caregivers can spend the funds; however, the program explains that the funds should be used to take care of the children. This includes, but is not limited to, clothing, school supplies, food, or other daily necessities such as rent or utilities. There is currently a waitlist for this program.

One caregiver describes the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program’s services as “...making ends meet where we couldn’t—emotionally, physically.”

Staff

Six staff members operate the program. Three are family advocate counselors, one is an outreach coordinator, one is a senior administrative services assistant, and one is a program administrator. All six work for the Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center and devote 100% of their work time to the program. Compassion and dedication among the staff certainly contribute to the program's sustainability and success. Staff noted that intentional efforts are made to ensure that program leadership and staff represent the backgrounds and cultural experiences of the families served.

Partners praised the program’s staff for their consideration of caregivers’ time and efforts, explaining that the staff does not send caregivers away due to issues like lack of paperwork. Instead, staff members acknowledge that caregivers may not be able to take time off work to make another office visit and they are intentional about not creating barriers to accessing services. At times, staff members accompany caregivers to referring agencies to facilitate a warm hand-off.

“What makes [the program] work is [the staff’s] willingness and their drive to make it work.”

– Partner

Key Partners

The program engages several community agencies and organizations as partners, including the 11 identified below.

- ▶ **Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc, Sisters in Service Foundation** – provides Christmas baskets and back-to-school supplies.
- ▶ **Center for Youth Advocacy and Well-Being** – referral source for children in the program who need counseling and additional resources to prevent and address possible juvenile court involvement, truancy issues, and behavior issues at home.
- ▶ **Diersen Charities** – the director and staff provide financial assistance for the yearly Gala, supply Thanksgiving baskets and Christmas toys, and serve as mentors for the Boys’ Mentoring Group.

- ▶ **Hope Church** – provides Christmas baskets and back-to-school items.
- ▶ **Life Diaper Pantry** – provides free diapers for children and adults once per month.
- ▶ **Memphis Shelby County School District (Seed Office)** – provides trauma-focused parenting classes to kin caregivers.
- ▶ **Public Defender’s Office** – provides community resources for legal issues and serves as a liaison with Juvenile Court when needed.
- ▶ **Shelby County Community Services Agency** – provides financial assistance for utilities, rent, and medication for families.
- ▶ **Shelby County Department of Children’s Services** – fully funds the program and monitors outcomes and progress.
- ▶ **Tennessee State Employees Association** – provides Christmas toys and monetary donations for families for Christmas.
- ▶ **UTHSC Food Pantry, “The Cupboard”** – provides free food for families twice per month.

Caregiver Engagement

The program follows the adage of "nothing about us without us," recognizing the importance of engaging kin caregivers as collaborative partners in service development. The program acknowledges that families must help create and take ownership of their individualized service plans. In addition, kin caregivers provide input on program development and implementation as members of the program’s advisory board and they have held leadership positions such as chair and co-chair of the board. The program also surveys caregivers to gauge their satisfaction with the program after each activity to learn what is working for the program and what is not working.

Outreach to Families

The Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program spreads the word about its services and supports for kinship families by directly connecting with other organizations and agencies, such as churches, schools, and community centers. Leaving referral forms at these agencies and organizations allows for easy referrals to the program. Additionally, the program staff is engaged in a community advisory council that includes for-profit and non-profit organizations and allows members to share information about services and events. They also utilize media outlets, such as radio, newspapers, and social media platforms, to advertise the program.

Most referrals come from the Department of Human Services, courts, and schools. Self-referral is also common, and families who self-refer often learn about the program through word of mouth or social media.

Funding and Sustainability

The project was initially funded through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant, from 2001 to 2003, before being built into the Tennessee Department of Children's Services' budget. The Center on Developmental Disabilities (CDD), a programmatic unit of the College of Medicine in the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC), houses the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program. UTHSC provides a dedicated building to the program as an in-kind occupancy. The covered expenses include office space, therapy/meeting rooms for support groups and consultation, and a large community room, providing a total of 4,623 square feet at an estimated value of \$51,596 per year.

UTHSC also supports the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program through a "Relative Caregiver's Support Fund," created by the UTHSC Office of Alumni Affairs and Development, which allows donors to contribute to the program. The UTHSC Office of Alumni Affairs and Development manages the funds in this account. With the help of UTHSC, community partners, private citizens, and anonymous donors, the program can assist families and children with basic needs such as food, clothing, hygiene items, baby items, and more. These contributions and resources are estimated at \$35,000 per year, but the amount can vary year to year.

With a 21-year history of strong support from UTHSC, the program will continue to have the needed infrastructure to operate successfully.

Demonstrating Success and Continuing Quality Improvement

The state audits the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program every two years to ensure that it is meeting program goals and using financial resources effectively. The program reports on measures such as how many people it has served, family status (e.g., whether a child remains in relative care outside of state custody), referral sources, and contact with birth parents.

Caregivers who spoke with Network staff only had positive things to say about the Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program. Caregivers discussed receiving food, financial assistance, emotional support, and more. Caregivers made it clear that program staff go above and beyond to make them feel supported.

Challenges and Areas for Program Improvement and Growth

Staff noted that one of the program's primary challenges is funding. Families have significant needs beyond what the program can offer, and additional funding would help increase support to the families. One partner mentioned, "If they had more resources, [they] could do more."

Program staff also recognize a gap in services when it comes to mental health due to limited availability in the community.

Lessons Learned

When the staff was asked what they would consider a key lesson they have learned, one staff member noted the importance of having a strategic plan outlining what services to offer and how they will be implemented, and then acting on that plan in a timely manner. Another key takeaway to running a successful kinship program is to create an environment where staff needs are met so they can be most effective.

Additional Program Resources

- ▶ [Program website](#)
- ▶ [Referral form](#)
- ▶ [Family Needs Scale](#)
- ▶ [Program flyer](#)
- ▶ [Caregiver Satisfaction Survey](#)
- ▶ [Service Plan](#)

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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