

Engaging Caregivers in the Community

January 21, 2026

- Welcome, we will begin at the top of the hour
- Please type in the **chat** box - your name, state, tribe (if applicable), and role
- Type questions in the **chat** box at any point during our time together
- **We will provide a separate meeting link for a 30-minute Q&A with our presenters, starting in an hour, at 3 PM ET**
- By the end of the week, all participants will receive a link to the slides and the recording

GRANDFAMILIES & KINSHIP SUPPORT NETWORK

A National Technical Assistance Center

- Since 2021, Generations United, in cooperation with the U.S. Administration for Community Living, has operated the first and only federally funded technical assistance center on kinship/grandfamilies
- Purpose is to provide technical assistance to the array of state, territorial, and tribal government agencies and organizations so they can better serve the families by working across systems and maximizing resources



How We Help



Learning Collaboratives and Information Dissemination

The Network hosts [webinars](#) and facilitates learning collaboratives.



Individual Assistance

We respond to [individual requests for help](#) from government agencies and nonprofit organizations.



Bridging Systems for Kinship Families

The Network is helping Idaho, San Diego County, and Oneida Nation of Wisconsin optimize their collaborative approaches and improve their services. Solutions will be replicable for others.



A Centralized Hub

The Network is elevating exemplary kinship/grandfamily practices and programs from around the country on its new accessible website, www.GKSNetwork.org.

Welcome Our Presenters



Dr. Angela Tobin
Owner, Founder, & Director,
Kinship Caregivers Connect, Ohio



Dr. Ali Caliendo
Executive Director,
Foster Kinship, Nevada

Engaging Kinship Caregivers in the Community

Angela Tobin OTD
Ali Caliendo, PhD

Agenda

Overview of family engagement

Common barriers to engagement

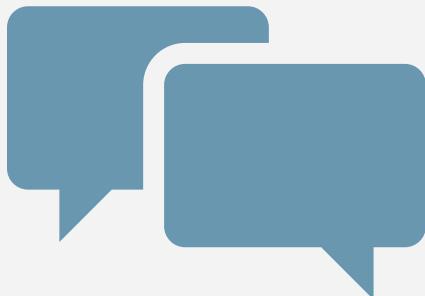
Strategies for meaningful engagement

Building a community of support

Q+A



Get to Know You



What is one challenge you have experienced with engaging kinship families?

What is one strength in engaging families?

Kinship Family Engagement

Defining Caregiver and Family Engagement

Headstart Program:

“An interactive process through which program staff and families, family members, and their children build positive and goal-oriented relationships. It is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. **Family engagement means doing with—not doing to or for—families”**
(USDHHS, 2018, p.2)

Schools:

“A balanced and equitable partnership between educators and parents **characterized by open and reciprocal relationships built on mutual trust and regard for one another’s roles.** The purpose of the partnership is to promote conditions for student learning and well-being through shared knowledge, skills, and resources”
(Bachman and Beard, 2025, p. 139)

Breaking Down Engagement

- How: Relational/partnership
 - Trust; Mutual respect
 - Walking with families; caregiver-led
- Purpose: Goal-Oriented
 - Equitable support for kinship families
 - Autonomy, self-efficacy, skill, and knowledge building
- Context: Trauma-informed and culturally responsive; adaptable and changes overtime

Engagement for Kinship Families

The process of connecting, forming and sustaining a mutual, individualized, and family-centered partnerships with kinship caregivers and their families to support their autonomy and well-being.

- Trust in kinship engagement is built when caregivers experience shared understanding, genuine welcome, and expert guidance that respects their right to decide what is best for their family.
- Engagement should be an individualized process that works towards caregivers' self-identified needs and goals.
- Engagement does not stop at initial connection; it's a journey overtime.

A Pyramid of Engagement

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Definition

Co-leadership: caregivers as stakeholders, decision makers, and staff members

Community building: integrating with a program overtime, bi-directional engagement

Intake: initial interaction as doorway to services
Attendance: Showing up to programming

Outreach: Including programming recruitment and family finding practices (wide net)

Related Outcomes

- # of staff with lived experience
- caregiver referrals

- caregiver retention
- caregiver referrals

- # of intake calls/surveys
- program attendance

- # of outreach efforts
- # of referrals (self + community)

Practical Ways to Build Engagement

- **Lived Experience:** Credibility Through Shared Reality
 - Trust begins when families feel seen and understood, not assessed from a distance.
 - Lived experience does not replace professional boundaries or expertise. It shifts the power dynamic from helper-recipient to partner-partner and creates immediate relational safety.
- **Hospitality:** Creating Physical, Psychological and Emotional Safety
 - Hospitality is the intentional creation of dignity-affirming spaces where families can exhale.
 - Many kinship caregivers have been conditioned to expect surveillance, blame, or consequences when interacting with systems. Customer service, human touches, and calm spaces disrupt that expectation.
- **Expertise Without Judgment:**
 - Trust deepens when families recognize that staff have real expertise but are not using it to control or correct them.
 - This approach respects families as experts in their own lives and recognizes that sustainable outcomes for children depend on caregiver ownership, not compliance.

Engagement Across the Caregiver Journey

Initial Caregiving: Crisis and Role Disruption



- Sudden, unexpected placement
- High emotional load
- Immediate needs overshadow long-term planning
- Mistrust of systems/fear of surveillance or scrutiny

Family Stabilization/ Capacity Building



- Routines begin to form
- Multiple systems come into focus
- Stress is still high but more predictable
- Caregivers are able to ask themselves, “how do I make this work for the longer-term?”

Long-Term Family Healing



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- Caregiver role integrated into family identity
- Trauma effects surface once crisis has passed
- Caregivers think long term

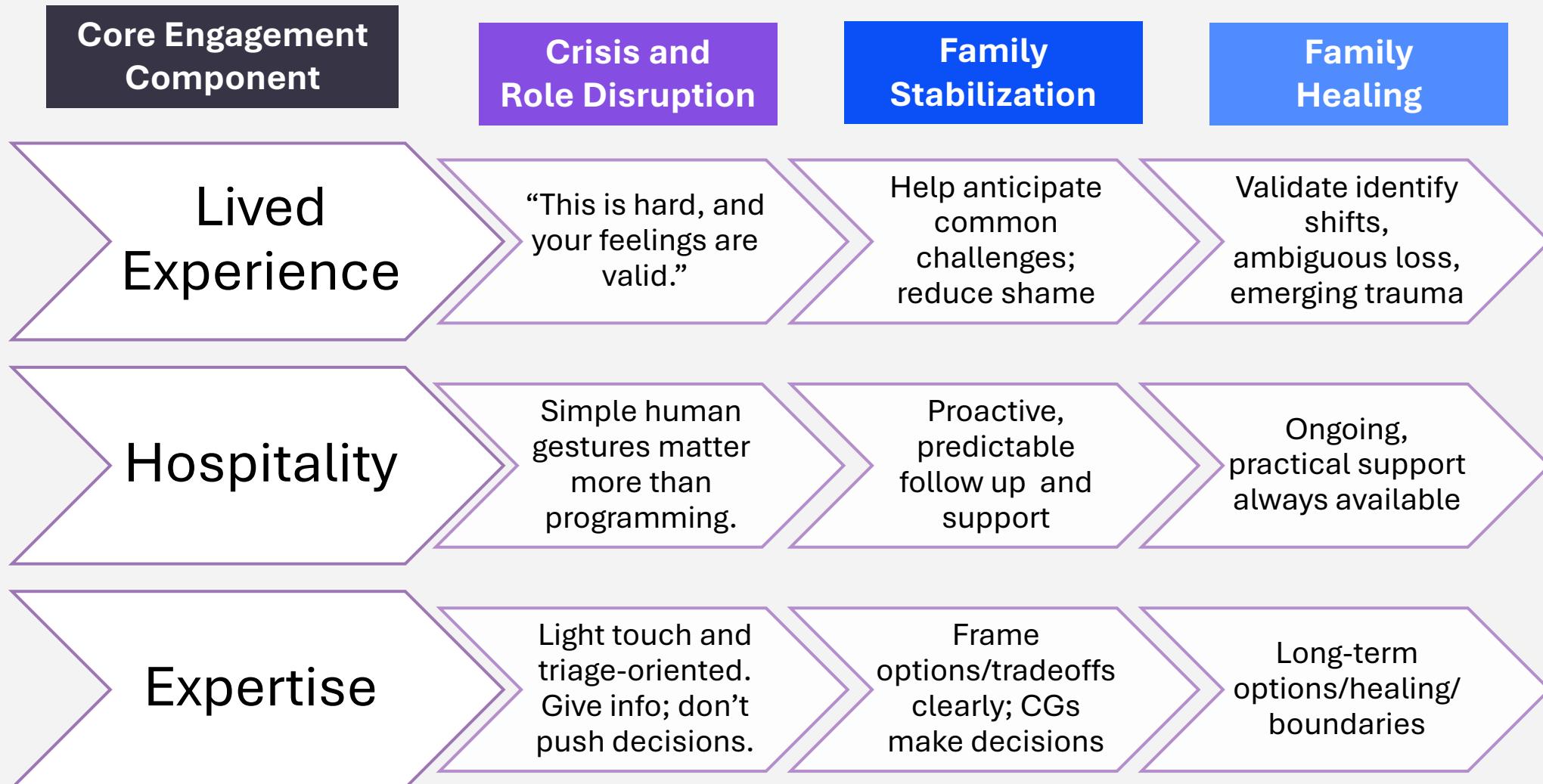
Families stay engaged instead of withdrawing or avoiding help

Families begin to see engagement as useful rather than threatening.

Families internalize skills, confidence, and resilience that support child well-being.

Engaging Caregivers throughout the Journey

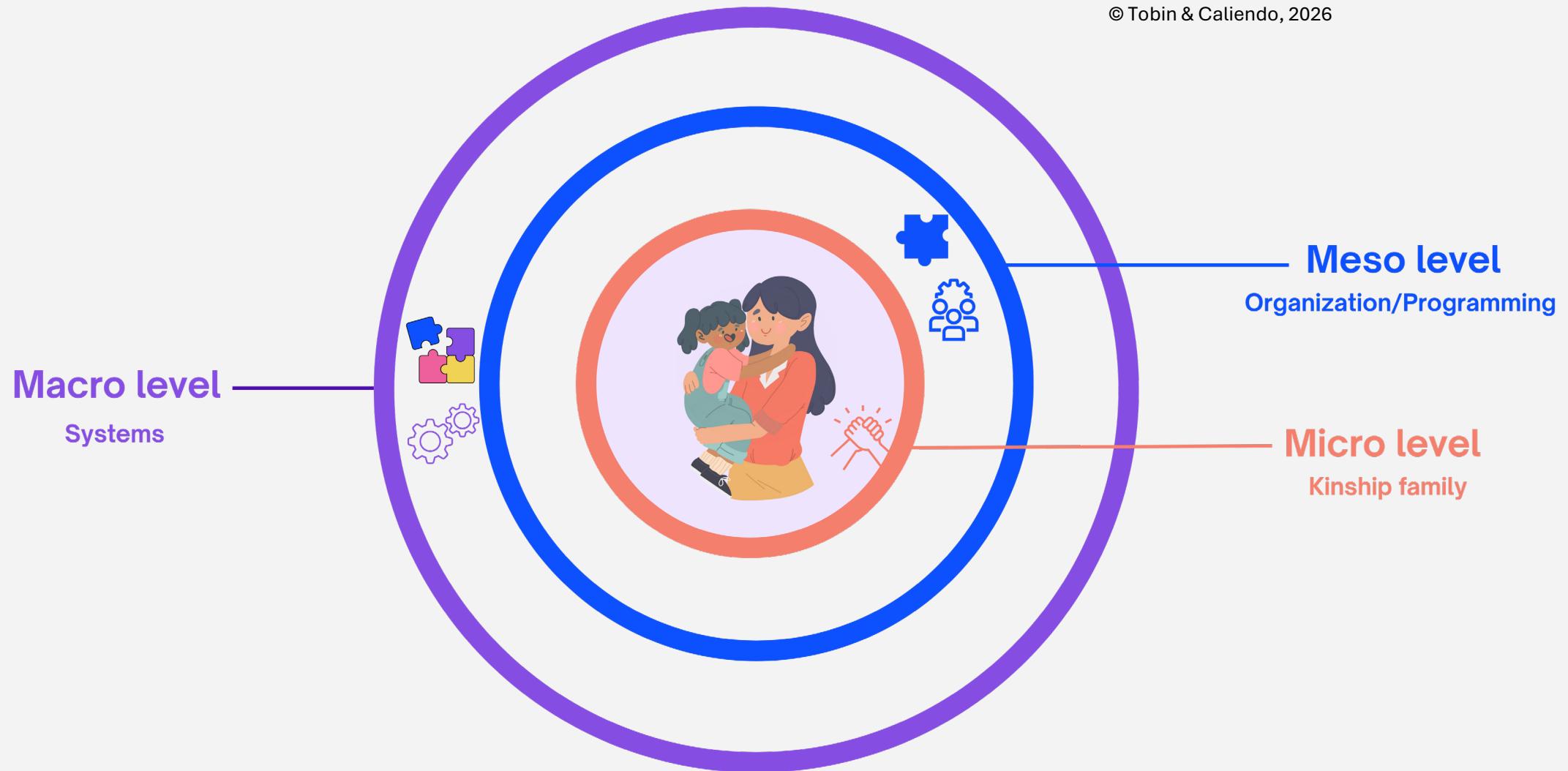
Applying Core Components to Engagement



Engaging Kinship Families: Facilitators and Barriers

Kinship Family Engagement: An Ecological Systems Approach

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Family-Level Barriers (Micro)

- Initial interaction
 - Feelings of overwhelm
 - Family experiences of trauma
 - Need to build trust
- Lack of knowledge that they are a kinship family and supports available
 - Mixed information from differing systems
- Lack of time, energy, and capacity to engage
- Feeling that services/systems are being done to them instead of with them

Creating a Safe Space for Caregivers



Family-Level Strategies (Micro)

- Individual interactions with families are most critical to engagement*
- Practice trauma-informed outreach- First connections matter
- Learn about caregiver and family needs on an individual level
 - Approach: Conversation and learning about the family rather than assessment
 - Sharing is personal: use understanding, non-judgement, and empathy
 - Caregivers as the experts of their families + where they are on their journey
- Customer service approach
 - Non-verbal cues and language matter!
 - Provide time and space for families
 - Understand barriers to engagement; seek feedback

Trauma-Informed Communication



Be Calm	Be Prepared to Listen	Be Positive	Be Honest	Be Resourceful
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take a breath and make sure you are calm before contacting families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trust caregivers as the experts on their families and listen to what they have to say.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognize and highlight families' and children's strengths!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share information openly and willingly with families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connect families with resources for themselves or their children.

Organizational Level Barriers (Meso)



- Lack of funding and inclusive funding options
 - Focus on specific subpopulation within kinship care (ie: formal versus informal)
- Siloing of work and departments
- Decreased awareness around kinship care and a kin-first culture
 - Need for training
- Decreased staff capacity
 - Work overload and staff burnout
- Lack of lived experience representation among staff

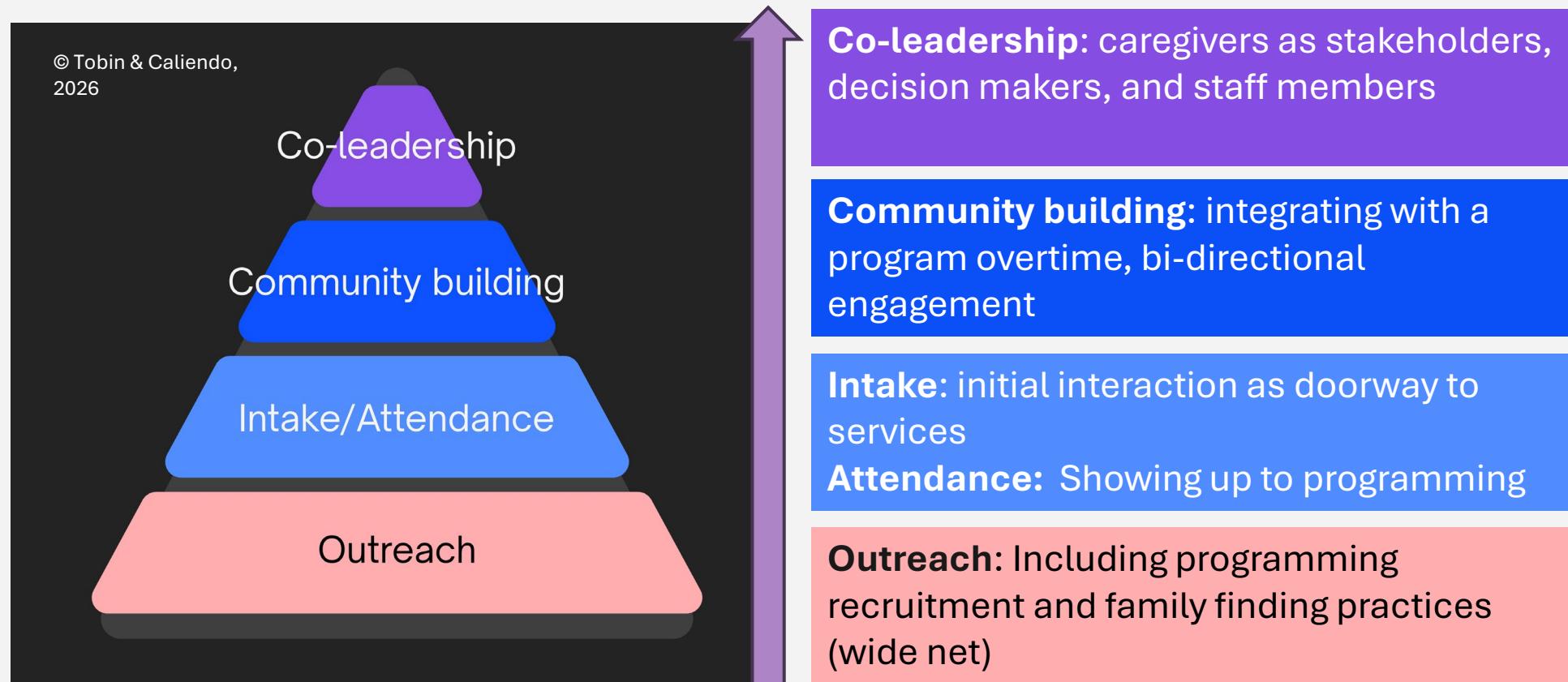
Organizational Level Strategies (Meso)



- Offer various programming options for accessibility
 - Virtual and in-person, various time options
 - Maintain a consistent schedule + Flexibility/adaptability
- Broad inclusion criteria for services
 - Include as many kinship family types as possible
- Intentionally hire and train peers + professionals with lived experience
- Prioritize organization-wide diversity and cultural responsiveness
 - Consistently gather caregivers' feedback (formally and informally)
- Seek funding for programs around population needs
- Build a strength-based, kin-first, and kin-responsive culture

Build in Organizational Structures for Various Engagement Types

Definition



Tips for engaging caregivers with lived experience in a meaningful way

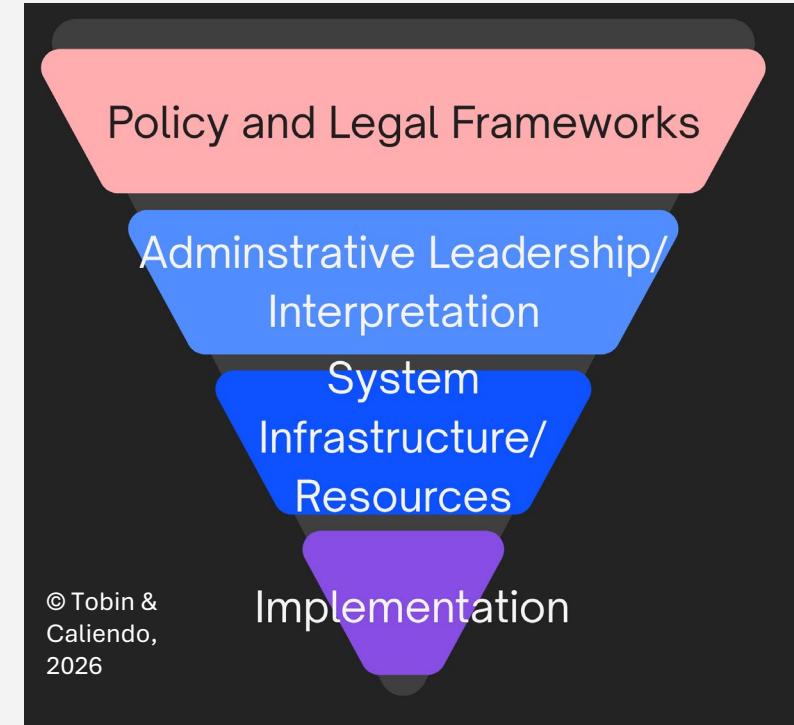


1. Integrate lived experience as a core qualification, not a checkbox
2. Make roles substantive, not symbolic
3. Acknowledge and address the added complexity lived experience can bring
4. Build a trauma-informed workplace for all
5. Avoid extracting stories without offering influence
6. Normalize disagreement and complexity
7. Close the feedback loop



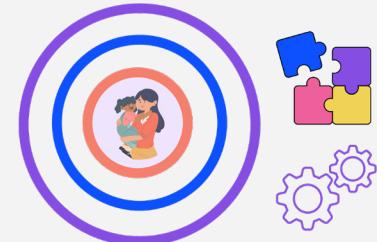
System Level Barriers (Macro)

1. Federal and State Legal Frameworks that Prioritize Process
2. Compliance-driven Systems
3. Power Imbalances as System Design
4. Fragmented and Siloed Systems
5. Historical and Ongoing System Harms That Shape Trust
6. Tokenized Use of Lived Experience



These are not family failures. They are predictable outcomes of systems designed from the top down, with limited input from families themselves.

System Level Strategies (Macro)



The Challenge:

- Systems are often designed top-down
- Trust with kinship families is built bottom-up.
- When these operate separately, families disengage, staff burn out, and outcomes suffer.

The Strategy - Bridge Community Programming with System Partnership:

- Community-based programs stabilize families while partnering with public systems to drive system improvement.

Community Partnership

Headstart Program:

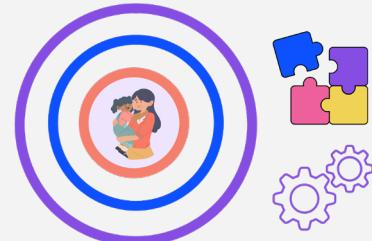
“Community engagement refers to the mutually respectful, strengths-based interactions of Head Start and Early Head Start staff and families with community members and agencies at all levels. These partnerships support parents’ roles as valued community members and their progress toward their goals for themselves and their children.”
(USDHHS, 2018)

Kinship Navigator Programs:

Community partnership in a kinship navigator program is not optional or symbolic. It is a legally required framework of consultative program design, cross-system coordination with state and local agencies, and shared accountability with kinship caregivers, youth with lived experience, and community partners that must result in reduced system fragmentation, meaningful access to benefits and services, and improved stability for kinship families.

(Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 627(a)(2)(B) (2018)).

System Level Strategies (Macro)



How the Bridge Works:

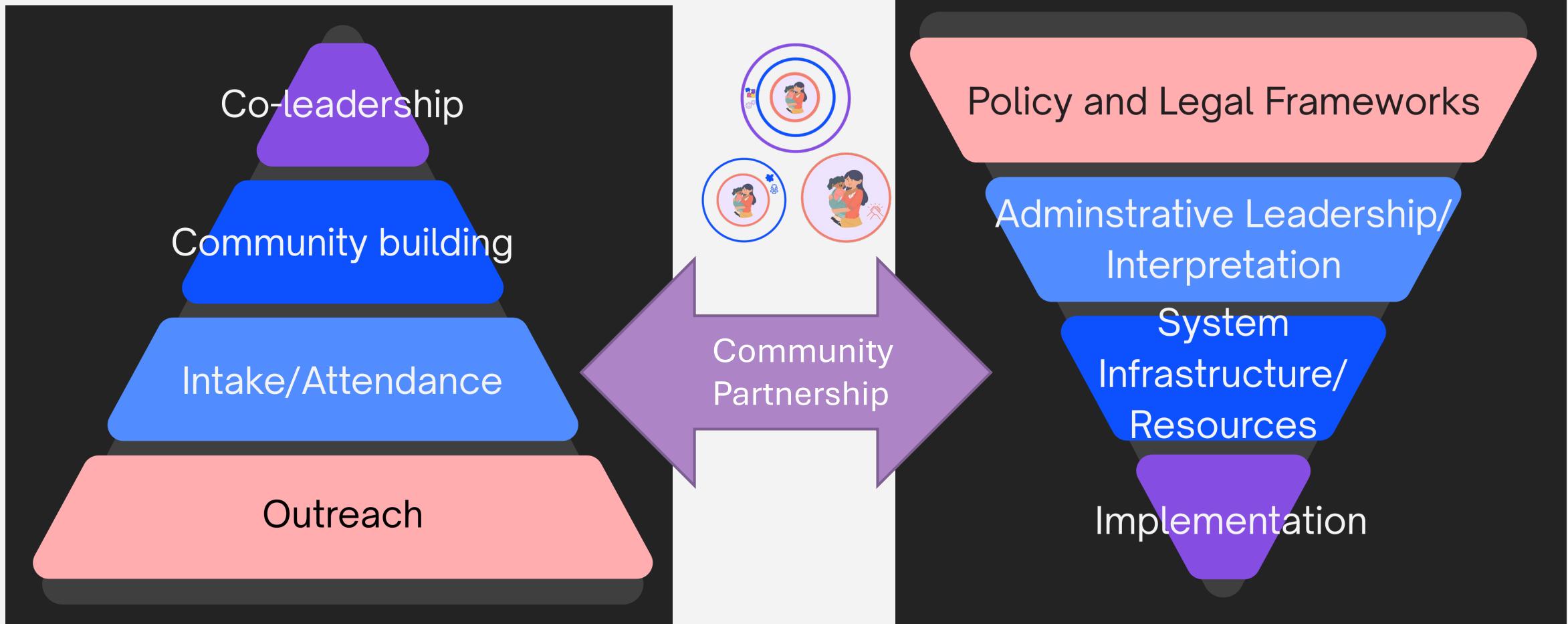
- Trusted community partners translate family experience into actionable insight.
- Caregiver and child experience is elevated without direct exposure to power-heavy space.
- Trust flows upward, change flows downward.



It Takes a Village: Collaboration across the Community

Linking formal and community supports at every ecological systems level

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Understanding Engagement from Caregivers' Perspective— Kinship Caregivers Connect

Peer Support

KCC was critical to my confidence and fear of being thrust into a kinship arrangement in the beginning of the process. I was introduced to some resources that I did not know existed, **but most importantly, I was connected with other people my age that were not only in the same ocean, but in my boat.**

KCC is a big warm fuzzy hug that is also strong and tough and informed. The other parents are like me in at least one important way.

Peer Support

I like everything- sharing with others; learning from the speakers and all the love we have for each other. The confidentiality, the vulnerability, the laughter, tears & sharing out hurts, the good, bad & everything.

Impact

It provided a needed inherent support and the emergency strength to push on in fighting for myself and advocating against the unfair barriers we face. I am a year ahead of where I was three months ago

I am a successful caregiver. When I was alone, I had many fears, once I had back up, it made a significant difference.

Model

Love Zoom from home. My schedule is crazy and the ease of joining in helps

The diversity of the participants, the volume of info available . The director... she shares her experience and her entire family with us and it's truly like one big family!!!

It is extremely authentic. The power of people standing together behind a common set of strengths and weaknesses is palpable

Understanding Engagement from Caregivers' Perspective— Foster Kinship

Organizations as the Bridge

It's hard to put into words how much I'm impressed with this organization. Managing a family is hard, but then you add fostering or adoption, and boy, watch out!! To have an organization created to help bridge the gap of resources for families in Vegas and beyond is such a **HUGE blessing. I needed help, and Foster Kinship had the answers. It's a true testament of how collaboration between nonprofits and state agencies can be done. What a **GREAT** example of how to take struggles and discomfort and turn them into solutions and community! Thank you Foster Kinship for your continued effort to help families suffering get the resources to change the lives of children and their families. Well done!"**

Hospitality/ Customer Service

The foster system is complex and often, families feel like they have to navigate it alone. Foster Kinship advocates for the whole family. I've witnessed it in the community and then myself. Their team takes the time and the burden away by providing responsive customer service and walking alongside us. Each team member has been a joy to work with and I am so grateful they are a resource in our community! Foster Kinship takes their role as a leader in the field seriously and you can feel it from each one of their staff!

Nice warm welcome. Its a really nice center clean they will give you clothing for your children if needed will help u fill out your foster care and TANF paper work n much more these people are a blessing to us if need them.

Community Building

“Extremely kind and patient staff, very knowledgeable on foster care information/needs. Always willing to help wherever they can. The people at Foster Kinship are truly angels. I love to bring all my donations to this place, they are always giving to the foster families who truly are in need it.”

Lived Experience

Maria has been an incredible support and true inspiration. Her dedication to foster kinship and the way she consistently shows up with care, resources, and encouragement has made such a difference in my journey. Her peer parent support groups have helped me grow so much as a parent—giving me tools, confidence, and a community I didn't know I needed. I'm truly grateful for her heart and leadership. Thank you for being a light in this space!



Big Picture Takeaways

- Creating a culture of kinship family engagement with breadth and depth
 - Varied ways of connecting with and involving kinship families
 - Engaging with caregivers throughout their journey
- Implementing lived experience, hospitality, and expertise to support kinship families
- Address engagement from varied ecological levels: Micro, Meso, + Macro
 - Acknowledge and use creativity and intentionality to minimize barriers
 - Implementing trauma-informed and culturally responsive strategies
- Embrace community partnership as a necessary responsibility to meaningfully support families

Reflection/ takeaway

**What is one way you can better engage
kinship families in your work?**

Reach Out to Us!

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Ali Caliendo

- Ali@fosterkinship.org
- <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alisoncaliendo/>
- Model details and outcomes- www.FosterKinship.org/model

References

Bachman, H. F., & Beard, K. S. (2025). Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs: Exploring Educators' Mindsets for Building Relationships with Parents Using the FEEB-E Survey. *School Community Journal*, 35(1), 137-168.

Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 627(a)(2)(B) (2018).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2018). *Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework*.

Suggested presentation reference:

- Tobin & Caliendo. (2026, January). *Engaging Kinship Caregivers in the Community*. The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network. Virtual.

Connect & Access Support

Request assistance

We will add you to our monthly newsletter list, unless you ask us not to. To see past issues: www.gksnetwork.org/the-network-connection-newsletter/

For the latest updates, follow the Network on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/grandfamilies-and-kinship-support-network/)!





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