

Lessons from the Field: Leveraging Partnerships to Address Staff and Infrastructure Needs and Extend Reach



Introduction

Partnerships are foundational to the work of Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and Title VI Native American Aging Programs (Title VI programs). Whether they improve outreach, increase revenue, or spur innovation, partnerships help AAAs and Title VI programs better achieve their mission. In fact, a [2022 USAging survey of AAAs](#) found that, on average, AAAs partner with 17 different types of organizations to support older adults and caregivers, including kin caregivers. [USAging's 2023 survey of Title VI programs](#) found that Title VI programs partner with a similar variety of organizations.

This set of case profiles builds upon the work of a learning community hosted by the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) and USAging for AAAs and Title VI programs interested in starting new kin caregiver supportive services at their organizations. [Insights from the learning community](#) are available and can be used by any agency or organization with an interest in starting a program to serve kinship/grandfamilies.

Some of the challenges learning community participants discussed included outreach difficulties, limited funding, and limited staff to care for children while kin caregivers are receiving services. Among the potential solutions they considered was leveraging partnerships – which could help address staff and infrastructure needs, boost funding, and increase reach. These three uses of partnerships are highlighted in the two case profiles in this resource. Profiles of potential solutions to another challenge identified by learning community participants are highlighted in [Lessons from the Field: Overcoming Transportation Barriers in Supporting Kinship/Grandfamilies](#).

It is our hope that sharing these case profiles will encourage AAAs, Title VI programs, and others to explore innovative ways to better support kinship/grandfamilies.

Kin caregivers are grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends who are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. The families they form with the children in their care are known as kinship families, grandfamilies, or kinship/ grandfamilies.

Partnering to Develop a New Service, Stretch Resources, and Expand Funding

Direction Home of Eastern Ohio, Youngstown, OH

When Christy Boone, Director of Housing and Special Projects at [Direction Home of Eastern Ohio \(DHEO\)](#), was first charged with starting a kin caregiver respite service at the AAA, neither she nor DHEO had any previous experience serving kinship/grandfamilies. For assistance, Boone approached an existing DHEO partner, Easterseals of Northeast Ohio, with which her agency already collaborated to provide adult day services, home-delivered meals, and transportation for older adults. Easterseals has extensive experience working with children and adults with disabilities, and their families. At the time, they also provided services in three out of four counties in DHEO's service area and wanted to expand their footprint with the addition of new services in their Youngstown location.

The two partners developed a summer camp for children of kin caregivers. Easterseals brought their expertise in working with children with disabilities and their families; offered space for the camp; staffed the camp; and provided transportation, meals, and snacks for the children. DHEO provided funding and expertise in working with older adults.

To enhance their services while also reducing costs, Easterseals enlisted social work and education student interns from Youngstown State University to serve as camp counselors under the supervision of Easterseals clinicians.

DHEO developed additional partnerships with their local Senior Farmers Market, Ohio State University Extension, Youngstown State University's basketball team, the Youngstown Fire Department, Mahoning County Library, and the OH WOW Science Center to provide no-cost food, educational opportunities, and recreation activities for the low-income kinship/grandfamilies the camp serves.

Additionally, Boone increased revenue for the camp through fundraising activities with the local United Way, local Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, and local foundations, and with their U.S. congressional representative, who obtained congressionally directed funding for the camp.

When asked how to replicate their success, Boone recommended looking broadly for potential partners and seeking partners who have expertise in the types of services to be developed. For funding, she also suggests a wide search. "Look for big and small opportunities," she says. "A six-figure grant is great, but even \$5,000 is helpful....And little grants can often lead to big grants because funders talk to each other."

Partnering with a University Extension Office to Expand Services, Extend Reach, and Reduce Costs

First Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability, Johnson City, TN

Upon her arrival at [First Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability \(FTAAAD\)](#) from the [University of Tennessee \(UT\) Extension Office's Department of Family and Consumer Sciences \(FCS\)](#), Tracy Buckles, FTAAAD Healthy Aging & Nutrition Coordinator, immediately saw how the two organizations, which offer complementary services to kin caregivers and their families, could collaborate.

Like all university- and college-based Extension Offices in the [Cooperative Extension System](#) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [UT Extension](#) strives to improve the quality of life of state residents through research and education about family and consumer sciences, youth development, community development, and agriculture. Similarly, [FTAAAD](#), like other [AAAs](#), seeks to improve the quality of life of older adults and family caregivers in their community.

FTAAAD and FCS collaborate in a variety of ways. Licensed to provide the evidence-based training course Powerful Tools for Caregivers, which has a kin caregiver component, FTAAAD offers this course to its own kin caregiver clients who are ages 55 and older as well as to kin caregivers of all ages enrolled with FCS. Likewise, FCS offers the evidence-inspired [Caring for our Kin](#) course, developed by Pennsylvania State University's Extension Office, to its own kin caregiver students as well as kin caregivers receiving services from FTAAAD. FTAAAD uses primarily Older Americans Act Title III-D and III-E funds to fund its kin caregiver programming while FCS uses primarily state and USDA funds.

FTAAAD and FCS have also collaborated to provide three "Coffee and Conversation" social groups for kin caregivers. Additionally, they worked together to provide a resource fair for grandfamilies at an area community center.

Collaborating in these ways, Buckles notes, helps each organization provide more services for kinship/grandfamilies. Together, the two organizations support 15 to 20 kinship/grandfamilies per month, extend their reach to new geographic locations and kin caregiver age groups, and lower their per capita costs.

When asked how others might replicate their partnership, Buckles recommended reaching out to your [local Extension Office](#), bearing in mind that the staff with whom you initially speak may not be in leadership. When you eventually make the case to leadership, Buckles suggests emphasizing how partnering can help each organization improve services and stretch funding while still "meeting their numbers."

Conclusion

Partnerships help create a collaborative community that better serves kinship/grandfamilies, providing them with services that otherwise would not exist, more robust versions of previously existing services, and/or more conveniently located or timed services. They are also practical for the participating agencies/organizations. The outcomes experienced by DHEO and FTAAAD show how partnerships can help those in the Aging Network – both those with established kin caregiver services and those new to supporting kin caregivers – extend their reach, lower their per capita costs, and expand their funding streams.

For Additional Resources

Learn about more innovative kinship/grandfamily services and find tools for developing your own by visiting the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network's [Resource Library](#).

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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