

A Toolkit to Develop and Enhance

KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

Kinship navigator programs are designed to assist kin caregivers—grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends who raise children when their parents cannot—in navigating the many systems that impact them, including education, housing, and health care. These programs link caregivers to supports that help their kinship family thrive. Kinship navigator programs started over 25 years ago in a handful of states and grew to other parts of the country based on early success, two rounds of limited federal grants, and ongoing federal funding.

Generations United has been working with kinship navigator programs for decades and has been coordinating the nation's only multi-state kinship navigator program and evaluation. The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) at Generations United has been providing technical assistance to kinship navigator programs, new and old, since it was launched. Based on our years of experience, we have compiled this toolkit of best practices to develop or enhance kinship navigator programs. We hope you find it helpful.



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Federal Definition and Requirements

Federal law defines kinship navigator programs as programs “to assist kinship caregivers in learning about, finding, and using programs and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising and their own needs, and promote effective partnerships among public and private agencies to ensure kinship caregiver families are served.” [42 U.S.C. 627\(a\)\(1\)](#).

A brief background on the history of kinship navigator programs can be found in Appendix A, and the required elements for a federally supported kinship navigator program are listed in Appendix B.

Federal Title IV-B and Title IV-E Funding for Kinship Navigator Programs

Starting in 2018, two sources of federal child welfare funding became available to title IV-E public child welfare agencies choosing to operate or contract for the operation of a kinship navigator program. In general, it is best practice for child welfare agencies to contract with trusted community-based nonprofit organizations to run the programs. For a nonprofit provider of the jurisdiction’s approved kinship navigator program to access those funds, they must have a contract with the title IV-E agency. Although the funds go through the child welfare agency, these navigators can and should serve all kinship families, regardless of child welfare involvement.

Title IV-B Funds

A limited amount of title IV-B child welfare funds was available between 2018 and 2025, on a non-competitive basis, to any title IV-E child welfare agency that wanted to develop, enhance, or evaluate a kinship navigator program. Starting in 2026, \$10 million per year for three years will be available to kinship navigator programs through a competitive grant program. This opportunity will also be open to nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education as lead applicants, but they must coordinate with their jurisdiction’s title IV-E agency.

Title IV-E Funds

Ongoing, uncapped title IV-E funding also is available to any title IV-E child welfare agency that operates a kinship navigator program that meets federal programmatic requirements and is found to be evidence-based by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) (Clearinghouse). These title IV-E funds are additional funds and will not impact the jurisdiction’s other child welfare funding priorities.

Evidence-Based Kinship Navigator Models & Following Them with Fidelity

Federally Approved Evidence-Based Models

As of February 2026, six kinship navigator programs* have been found to be evidence-based by the Clearinghouse and are eligible to obtain 50% federal reimbursement of all program, training, and administrative costs to run the program:

- [Arizona Kinship Support Services](#)
- [Colorado Kinnected Kinship Navigator Program](#)
- [Kinship Interdisciplinary Navigation Technologically-Advanced Model \(KIN-TECH™\) – Florida](#)
- [Foster Kinship Navigator Program – Nevada](#)

* Please note that the Clearinghouse also includes 30 Days to Family as an evidence-based kinship navigator program. We do not include that program as part of our list because it is an evidence-based family-finding program, not a kinship navigator program.

- [Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO](#)
- [Washington State Kinship Navigator Program](#)

The kinship navigator programs in Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Washington serve all kinship families, regardless of child welfare involvement.

For jurisdictions interested in replicating the Florida, Nevada or Washington models, the Network hosted a webinar featuring the programs’ leaders. The [recording and slides](#) of that November 2025 webinar are available, free of charge.

Following a Federal Model

State and territory title IV-E child welfare agencies that want to follow one of these models with fidelity rather than evaluate their own program can follow the guidance in [ACYF-CB-PI-18-11](#) to submit a [Title IV-E Plan Pre-Print Attachment XII](#) and revise their cost allocation plan. Once the attachment has been approved by the Children’s Bureau at the U.S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) and the jurisdiction’s cost allocation plan has been modified and approved, 50% of all allowable program, administrative, and training expenditures for the title IV-E kinship navigator program are federally reimbursable.

As of January 2026, seven states and Puerto Rico have taken these steps and been approved by the Children’s Bureau to follow a model, as identified in this table:

State	Effective Date	Kinship Navigator Model Being Implemented
Delaware	August 1, 2023	KIN-TECH™ (Florida)
Iowa	May 1, 2025	Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO
Minnesota	January 1, 2025	Foster Kinship Navigator Program (Nevada)
Nebraska	September 1, 2024	Arizona Kinship Support Services
Puerto Rico	January 1, 2025	Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO
South Carolina	July 1, 2024	Foster Kinship Navigator Program (Nevada)
Utah	January 1, 2024	Foster Kinship Navigator Program (Nevada)
Virginia	April 1, 2025	Washington State Kinship Navigator Program

Tribal Kinship Navigator Programs

Many Tribes also offer kinship navigator programs. Unlike states, Tribes that directly operate their own title IV-E child welfare program are not required to follow a model from the Clearinghouse with fidelity to qualify for title IV-E reimbursement. Instead, they can culturally adapt a kinship navigator model and create what works for them. For example, the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe adapted the Washington kinship navigator model to their cultural strengths and needs. The Tribe runs their kinship navigator as a home visitation program known as the [Kinship Parenting Program](#) and it receives ongoing title IV-E reimbursement.

10 TIPS

FOR KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS THAT BUILD ON FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

The following tips apply whether you are following a federally approved evidence-based model; developing, enhancing, or evaluating your own model for submission to the Clearinghouse; or building or enhancing a kinship navigator program that is not seeking these federal funding opportunities.



#1



Serve Kin Caregivers Regardless of Child Welfare Involvement

Although kinship navigator programs seeking federal support are technically allowed by law and policy to restrict the families they serve to those involved with the child welfare system, we recommend that they serve a broader population of kinship families, as the Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Washington models do.

Consider kinship navigator programs as a prevention tool – a way to help support the families outside the child welfare system and to prevent children from entering the far more costly child welfare system. Nationally, for each child being raised by kin in foster care, there are 19 being raised by kin outside the system. In several states, particularly in the Southeast, the ratio is far more dramatic, with a single child in a kinship family in foster care corresponding to a triple-digit number of children in kinship families outside the system.

Kinship navigator programs began as a way to help keep children from needing to enter foster care. The families outside that system are the ones who typically need the most help “navigating” the maze of services that may be available at the community level, through state and county Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) offices, schools, aging services, health care programs, specialized housing, etc. Those caregivers who are raising children in the legal custody of the child welfare agency generally have help accessing these critical services. Those outside that system usually do not have any help, and kinship navigator programs are critical to them.

However, in addition to serving as a prevention tool, kinship navigator programs play an important role in providing specialized help to families who are involved with the child welfare system. Kinship foster families also need tailored help, including as they are navigating decisions related to becoming a licensed foster parent to their kin child and deciding on a permanency plan.



#2



Meaningfully Engage Kin Caregivers in Program Development and Implementation

Involve kin caregivers in all aspects of program development and implementation.

Rely on the voices of the families to tell you what they need and how to deliver it. Reach out and invite them to the table authentically and from the inception of developing a model or choosing to follow one of the federally approved evidence-based models. If it is not possible to involve the families from the inception, get them involved as soon as possible.

The federal Children's Bureau emphasized the importance of authentic engagement of family voices in planning, implementing, and evaluating all child welfare services in a [2019 Information Memorandum](#), and the Network has a resource to help you with the important work of [engaging lived experience](#).

Generations United manages a national network of kin caregivers called GRAND Voices. Members exist in almost every state and many Tribes. Generations United can help connect you to those individuals, who are trained and prepared to participate in a professional and thoughtful way.

Hire and train navigators who are kin caregivers and/or adults who grew up in kinship families.

Strive to hire and train kin caregivers and adults who grew up in their care as navigators. Engaging peer navigators helps address service barriers that often emerge due to trust issues between caregivers and social service providers. [Research](#) shows that peer navigators are more successful at connecting their peers with resources than degreed professionals.

#3



Provide Ongoing Training to Kinship Navigators that Includes Legal Options & Information on Public Benefits and Income Supports

Initial and ongoing training for kinship navigators is essential so they can provide the most informed assistance possible. Many [trainings are available](#), including a fillable PowerPoint template for delivering training on state-specific legal options, along with key information on public benefits and how various legal relationships impact eligibility for public benefits. For example, a grandparent who adopts their minor grandchild will no longer be eligible for TANF child-only support once they become the child's legal parent, but that same grandparent will be eligible to place their adopted grandchild on employer-sponsored health insurance as a dependent.



#4

Include Person-to Person Navigation and Direct Services



Ensure that the program is not simply a website and includes individual navigation.

Websites, brochures, and warm lines are critical and required components of these programs, but they must exist in combination with trained individuals who serve as navigators. The program must be well-staffed and supported financially so kinship families do not have to be turned away.

Use a kinship assessment tool.

Using a well-crafted tool that allows you to work with a caregiver to explore their areas of strength and challenges is an effective and thoughtful way to uncover their needs without having to resort to a general “what do you need help with” question that can cause caregivers to shut down. They often fear their answer to such a question will make them look too needy and will jeopardize the children’s placement with them. Approach it from the perspective of what you can do to help. For examples of such tools, including [Washington State’s kin caregiver needs assessment](#) and the [culturally adapted kin assessment that Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe uses](#), see this [Network webpage](#).

#5



Partner with Government Agencies and Community Organizations

House the program in trusted community organizations, not the child welfare agency.

In general, with very few exceptions, these programs should not be housed in the child welfare agency because of trust issues. Caregivers often fear that the children could be removed from their care by the child welfare agency and put into non-related foster care. As a result, caregivers and children may be hesitant to seek services or to share critical information needed to ensure they receive the appropriate supports for their family's needs. The four evidence-based models that are approved to serve all kinship families are each operated through community-based organizations.

Contract with community organizations serving kinship families.

Reach out to community and state organizations with dedicated kinship services and contract with them. Get them on board early in the process or as soon as possible and solicit their input throughout the design and implementation of the program. Consult your [state-specific GrandFacts fact sheet](#) for trusted kinship-serving organizations, along with their contact information. Consider one of them as a physical location to house and operate the kinship navigator program.

Partner with all relevant government agencies and community organizations.

In addition to those organizations you contract with, partner and regularly meet with government agencies and other community organizations serving the families. Not only will the partnerships help you develop and deliver services and supports to kinship families, partners will also learn from one another about promising practices and how to effectively respond to the families' strengths and challenges.

Government agencies:

- Aging
- Child Welfare
- Disability
- Education
- Housing
- Medicaid/Medicare
- Nutrition
- TANF

Aging is an important and often-overlooked system. Partner with them and maximize your impact. Your state unit on aging administers the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP), and your Area Agency on Aging (AAA) may use those funds to provide or contract with a nonprofit to provide supportive services to grandparents and other relatives age 55+ raising children. AAAs or those with which they contract often use other funds to support caregivers under age 55.



#5 CONTINUED...



If your state or AAA does not serve kinship families yet, they can. Reaching out to let them know of the need will help. Services covered under NFCSP include information and referral, individual counseling, support groups, caregiver training, respite care, and “supplemental services.” Some states use NFCSP funds to provide legal services and concrete goods.

Reach out and partner with community organizations and other providers that serve kinship families, including those that serve the families without offering them specialized programs:

- 2-1-1 or 3-1-1 information systems
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters - try to find Bigs who were raised in kinship families
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- Child care providers
- Family Resource Centers
- Legal aid and law school clinics that could provide much-needed legal assistance to kinship families who have had no child welfare involvement and need help obtaining legal custody or adoption
- Mental health and respite providers
- Schools of social work that can help with services and/or program evaluation
- Tutoring providers
- YMCAs

See the Network resource on [untapped partners](#) for these and other ideas.

Consider establishing a formal community collaborative.

To formalize a community collaborative, Florida’s evidence-based kinship navigator program at Children’s Home Network has Memorandums of Agreement with many agencies and a process for referrals so that service access is as seamless as possible for the families. The Network has a template and guidance for creating [Memorandums of Understanding \(MOUs\)](#).

#6



Create Website Resources

Develop a comprehensive website with legal tools and practical resources that can help the families understand their legal and financial options. You are welcome to link to any of the [Network resources](#) that may be helpful to the kinship families you serve.

Host the website through a partner organization or a neutral URL.

Because of trust issues and fear of having the children removed by the child welfare agency, do not use that agency's URL.

Highlight information and tools on the various legal options.

Partner with legal providers to produce these tools and webpages. For example, Washington State's kinship navigator program partnered with a community legal provider to prepare a useful handbook for caregivers. See the Network's [Resource Guides for Kin Caregivers and Thow Who Work with Them](#) for that document and other examples.

Generations United, with support from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, has [state-specific charts comparing adoption and guardianship for kinship foster families](#). While directed at those in foster care, much of the information should be helpful to kinship families outside of foster care who are considering their options. You are welcome to link to your state chart from your website.

Also on your website, include the array of legal options for kin caregivers both inside and outside the system. For those caring for children in the legal custody of the state or Tribe, ensure that you have thoughtful information about the requirements to become a licensed kinship foster parent. For those caregivers who have no child welfare involvement and do not want or cannot pursue a legal relationship to the children, but need help accessing education and health care services on their behalf, information should be shared about [power of attorney laws and educational and health care consent or authorization laws](#).

Include clear and specific information on available public benefits and income supports.

The website should contain eligibility criteria, rates, and forms. Make it as easy and transparent as possible for the caregivers to apply for supports, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grants; Medicaid; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as "food stamps"); housing assistance; free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), in addition to guardianship and adoption assistance for those children exiting foster care.

Consider producing and uploading videos exploring the various legal options and how to apply for benefits. Good examples include videos showing how to complete TANF child-only applications produced by [Foster Kinship in Nevada](#) and the [New York kinship navigator program](#). Caregivers and stakeholders in your community will know which applications are most difficult to complete and where videos would be most useful.

#6 CONTINUED...

Consider creating a user-friendly tool that leads families to the public benefits and community supports available to them. Something like the [locator tool](#) developed by Foster Kinship, which includes a clickable county map with community resources, or a [map like that on the New York state kinship navigator website](#).



Implement a short survey for users asking them about the website.

We at the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network use a short form at the end of each posted resource, which helps us gather helpful feedback about what is most needed.



#7

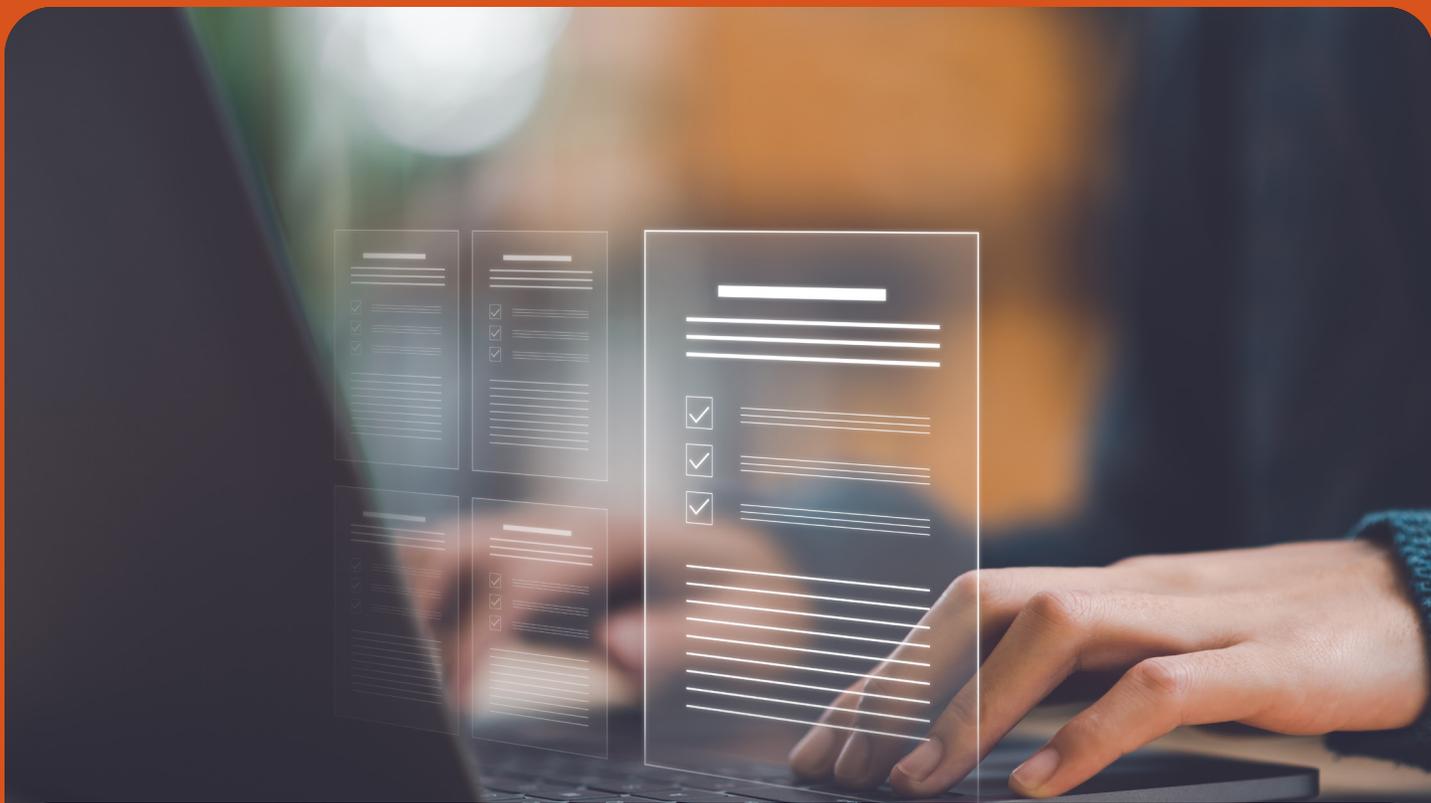


Provide Concrete Supports to the Families

Many existing kinship navigator programs have a dedicated funding pool to respond to the immediate, emergency, and concrete needs of kinship families. This is an important component of a kinship navigator program.

Since 2014, the kinship navigator program at the YMCA of San Diego County has provided emergency financial assistance and concrete goods to all kinship families in the County, whether foster-care involved or not. Funds are flexible and responsive to the family's needs. The Kinship Support Program assists with expenses, including childcare, utility bills, or car repairs, and purchases goods such as cribs, beds, or car seats. The YMCA of San Diego County was one of the early trailblazers in providing concrete goods and emergency assistance to kinship families. To leverage their public funding for these supports, they partnered with [CarePortal](#) to mobilize the power of community supports.

Washington State's kinship navigator program has also been providing these types of supports to the families it serves through its state-funded Kinship Caregivers Support Program (KCSP). The KCSP provides up to \$1,500 a year per family for the purpose of meeting concrete needs. The local administration of these funds is up to the several agencies around the state that run the kinship navigator program. Some agencies issue purpose-limited vouchers directly to the families and others shop with families for items such as groceries or clothing.



#8



Ensure Partner Agencies are Inclusive of Kin and Know How to Process Their Applications

Ensure staff members in partner agencies and organizations are well-trained on the strengths and needs of kin caregivers and how best to serve them. So many systems serve kinship families as part of their client base. However, staff members are frequently unaware of the families' unique circumstances and how programs impact them. For example, **TANF child-only grants** are typically the only source of ongoing support to meet the needs of the children in kinship families, yet relevant agency staff members are frequently unaware of these grants. TANF child-only grants often do not have unique application forms and agency staff may not know that eligibility criteria differ from TANF family grants. Kin caregivers may read or hear of a program for “parents” and think it does not include them. Staff must be sensitive to this and the many ways access to programs can differ for kinship families.

A kinship practice from Foster Kinship in Nevada is an exemplary way to address these challenges. Foster Kinship partnered with Nevada's Division of Supportive Services (DSS) to station two DSS workers full-time at the Foster Kinship offices. In that trusted, community-based setting, DSS workers process and approve applications for public benefits in real time. This nationally exemplary kinship practice, which began in 2021, removes common barriers faced by caregivers, such as long processing times, transportation challenges, confusion around documentation, and fear or frustration navigating public systems.

#9



Develop and Implement Outreach Strategies

To reach out to kin caregivers, it is often most effective to go to the places they go for the children. A printed brochure about your services to share in pediatricians' offices and schools can be very useful. You can also post it on your website.

The Network has tips on an array of [outreach strategies](#), as well as a specific toolkit that focuses on connecting and working with [K-12 schools](#).

Another promising practice is from New York's kinship navigator program. That program provides a "[permission to contact form](#)" to their child welfare and TANF/family assistance offices. When caregivers go to those agencies, a staff member will invite them to complete and sign the form. If the caregiver does, the staff member sends the form to the kinship navigator. The kinship navigator then makes five attempts to reach the caregiver to explore how they can help. You could experiment with which types of agencies to give these forms to, as it might also be helpful to have them at pediatricians' offices and in schools.



#10



Invest in Data Collection and Data Collection Partnerships

You will need skilled data collection whether you evaluate your own program or show fidelity to an evidence-based model included in the federal Clearinghouse.

Engage an evaluator from the inception, if evaluating your own kinship navigator program. Evaluators can provide invaluable input on program development and data collection that will save time and money down the road. They can help conduct focus groups to effectively consider the voices of the families and all relevant partners.

For those following an evidence-based Clearinghouse model, a strong evaluator can assist with proper fidelity monitoring.



Appendix A: Background on Kinship Navigator Programs

Kinship navigator programs started over 25 years ago as state and county initiatives to help kin caregivers, by which we mean grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, other extended family members, and close family friends who raise children when their parents cannot. These programs assist kin caregivers in navigating the many systems that impact them, including aging, child welfare, education, and housing. In the early 2000s, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington State all had robust statewide kinship navigator programs, and several other states and communities also had programs.

The early kinship navigator programs and those that followed were developed around the basic premise of supporting children and caregivers in kinship families. Decades of research has shown that children thrive with kin, and these programs help ensure that the families are supported so that children do not have to enter unrelated foster care. Beginning with the landmark Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, federal, state, and Tribal laws have acknowledged this research and have legal preferences for kin placements over placements with unrelated foster parents.

To support more kinship families, advocates sought to obtain federal funding to expand kinship navigator programs into additional communities. These advocacy efforts resulted in the authorization of Family Connection Grants in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act). There were two rounds of competitive grants in 2009 and 2012 under this successful program. A cross-evaluation of the 2009 kinship navigator grantees found that the kinship families served achieved safety goals and higher rates of permanency, and the programs were successful at ameliorating the needs of the families.

Based on the success of the early programs and the federal grantees, Congress passed the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Family First Act), which provides for ongoing federal reimbursement for up to 50% of a state or Tribe's costs in implementing a kinship navigator program. The Family First Act adopted the program requirements that applied to the earlier federal grantees from the Fostering Connections Act (see Appendix B), and added the requirement that these programs must be found by the federal Clearinghouse to meet evidence-based standards indicating that they are promising, supported, or well-supported.

Appendix B: Federal Criteria for Kinship Navigator Programs

The following program requirements exist for all kinship navigator programs seeking federal reimbursement and can be found at [42 U.S.C. 627\(a\)\(1\)](#). If you're following an evidence-based model in the Clearinghouse, these elements will be part of the model.

Kinship navigator programs must:

- Coordinate with other State or local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referral services, including the entities that provide 2-1-1 or 3-1-1 information systems where available, to avoid duplication or fragmentation of services to kinship care families.
- Be planned and operate in consultation with kinship caregivers and organizations representing them, youth raised by kinship caregivers, relevant government agencies, and relevant community-based or faith-based organizations.
- Establish information and referral systems that link (via toll-free access) kinship caregivers, kinship support group facilitators, and kinship service providers to:
 - » each other;
 - » eligibility and enrollment information for Federal, State, and local benefits;
 - » relevant training to assist kinship caregivers in caregiving and in obtaining benefits and services; and
 - » relevant legal assistance and help in obtaining legal services.
- Provide outreach to kinship care families, including by establishing, distributing, and updating a kinship care website, or other relevant guides or outreach materials.
- Promote partnerships between public and private agencies, including schools, community-based or faith-based organizations, and relevant government agencies, to increase their knowledge of the needs of kinship care families to promote better services for those families.

Kinship navigator programs may:

- Establish and support a kinship care ombudsman with authority to intervene and help kinship caregivers access services.
 - Support any other activities designed to assist kinship caregivers in obtaining benefits and services to improve their caregiving.
-



**GRANDFAMILIES & KINSHIP
SUPPORT NETWORK**
A National Technical Assistance Center

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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The Network is a project of Generations United.

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Read the online version of the toolkit to access the hyperlinked resources.

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