

Providing Legal Services



We are pleased to share profiles detailing three Exemplary kinship practices, all of which are effectively providing legal services to kinship/grandfamilies:

- ▶ [Balanced Legal Representation – Kin Support Program – Haa Yatx'u Saani \(Alaska\)](#)
- ▶ [Legal Options Website – Creating a Family \(North Carolina\)](#)
- ▶ [Statewide Legal Assistance – Legal Advice and Referral for Kinship Care \(LAARK\), King County Bar Association \(Washington State\)](#)

These practices help caregivers understand their legal options and secure the legal authority they need to make decisions for the children in their care. We encourage readers to consider how they can replicate these practices in their communities, and to [reach out to us for assistance](#).

Balanced Legal Representation – Kin Support Program – Haa Yatx'u Saani (Alaska)

Practice Description

The Kin Support Program – Haa Yatx'u Saani (ha yut koo saw knee - Our Precious Children), a culturally based kinship navigator program in Southeast Alaska, implements an exemplary practice of providing free, balanced legal representation for both parents and kin caregivers of any age who are outside of the child welfare system. This practice creates an environment where families feel supported and fairly treated.

The Kin Support Program's family specialists conduct an application-free intake process over the phone to gather general information. If the family specialist determines that a kin caregiver needs legal representation, the specialist refers the kin caregiver to the program's in-house kin attorney. To provide balanced legal representation, the specialist seeks the caregiver's permission to have the program offer one or both parents legal representation from the contracted parent attorney. There are similar procedures for when a parent applies for services.

The Kin Support Program mostly receives requests for legal help that focus on establishing legal caregiving arrangements. Legal assistance may range from advice and counsel to full representation in Tribal or State Court. Attorneys may also assist with other civil legal issues or questions about legal rights in child protection investigations. All legal services are free to kin caregivers and parents.

The balanced legal representation practice ensures equitable legal representation for the whole family. This practice supports positive communication inside and outside of court and minimizes adversarial hearings, all of which benefit the child and the family over the long term. Typically, the kin caregiver is grateful that the parent has dedicated legal support, and the parent appreciates having someone representing their best interests. It also facilitates due process and supports local Indigenous cultural practices around balance.

The Kin Support Program and the balanced legal representation practice are funded through federal, state, and local funding, as well as through private foundation funding and individual support. The program receives opioid settlement funds through a state grant, given the large percentage of kinship families impacted by addiction.

Partnership and Collaboration

Several staff members and attorneys who have varied experiences with kinship care informed the development of the practice. When developing the practice, the program sought the help of the Alaska Bar Association to review their forms and processes to ensure they align with the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. The kin and parent attorneys found helpful peer connections and engagement through the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, the Barton Child Law and Policy Center's Preventive Legal Advocacy & Pre-Petition National Cohort, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law's Legal Impact Network for Kin (LINK), and the Alaska Native Justice Center.

The Kin Support Program has found helpful partners in their community – such as their local AARP chapter, senior services, health care providers, school counselors, and their family engagement center – to assist with promoting their balanced legal services to families. Tribal social service agencies in the region and the local child welfare agency also provide referrals and help with outreach efforts.

Additionally, the practice benefits from the program's strong partnership with the Tlingit & Haida Tribal Court. The Tribal Court stocks pamphlets about the Kin Support Program for families who come in to petition for guardianship and adoption, and it often refers families to the program.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

The Kinship Support Program is less than two years old, and they are now developing a client management database and a formal evaluation process to collect and report on data regarding the families served and evidence of practice success. They are currently receiving informal feedback and witnessing how this balanced legal representation practice is helping kin caregivers and parents who may have been adversaries build trust with each other and come together to work in the best interest of the child. This practice can often improve family dynamics and result in children having more visits with their parents.

The Kinship Support Program is measuring the success of their legal practice by tracking the number of cases in which they secure a power of attorney or a guardianship, custody, or adoption order. Of those cases, they record how many were resolved through negotiation versus adversarial processes. They are also tracking legal advice and counsel provided to clients who are not seeking full representation or who are ineligible for full representation due to conflicts of interest.

In the first year of operations, the Kin Support Program served 62 families, about a third of whom accessed legal services. Of the dozen court cases filed over that time, all reached either a negotiated or default resolution.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **When starting a practice like this, you will need to create a library of legal forms**, including an independent contractor agreement for the parent attorney, referral forms, representation agreements, conflict-of-interest forms, joint representation forms, and release-of-information agreements. Ask your state or local Bar Association for help with reviewing the documents to ensure they align with the American Bar Association's Model Rules of Professional Conduct.
- ▶ **As you develop the practice, consider the culture of the families and communities you will serve.** The Kin Support Program's service recipients usually value relationships and community over individuality and materialism. The practice of balanced legal representation supports a cultural practice of balance that is important to their community members. Also, if you serve both urban and rural populations, be intentional in developing a practice that provides equitable services to both communities.
- ▶ **Focus on relationship building with community partners, board members, the courts, and others from the start.** They will be important supports for implementing your sustainability plan and getting the word out about the practice. You will also want to build a relationship with the local Child Protective Services (CPS), as well as state and regional leadership and staff. Schedule a meeting

early on to explain the program and practice, the target population, and how referrals can be made. The Kin Support Program has benefitted from monthly check-in meetings with CPS staff.

- ▶ **Avoid using form letters to tell parents about the availability of legal representation.** Instead, speak directly to the parent to explain why you are contacting them and how you can help. The Kin Support Program finds that oftentimes the parent is not aware that the kin caregiver has secured an attorney or what relationship the Program has to CPS. By communicating verbally, you can provide clarity on the opportunity that is available to them and minimize surprises and stress for the parent.
- ▶ **Consider offering additional services**, such as pre-petition legal support or help for families that mutually agree to dissolve a guardianship.
- ▶ **Engage people with lived experience in the development of the practice and as staff.** Kin caregivers and parents will likely find the practice and staff more approachable if they know it is led by people who have been in their shoes.

Additional Practice Resources

To learn more about this practice, review the links below.

- ▶ [Custody Handout](#)
- ▶ [Delegation of Parental Rights](#)
- ▶ [Parent Handout](#)

Legal Options Website – Creating a Family (North Carolina)

Practice Description

Creating a Family, a national nonprofit designed to strengthen families by providing them with training and educational support, launched its North Carolina-focused legal options website in 2023, following a series of listening sessions with kin caregivers. During the listening sessions, many kin caregivers identified a need for legal advice and noted that they were unable to afford an attorney and either did not qualify for or have access to legal aid. This practice is exemplary because it is grounded in these expressed needs of kin caregivers, and it is designed to provide quality information in a variety of formats to kin caregivers who are navigating legal permanency options for their family. For each legal option, the website includes videos with experts explaining the option, a written description of the option, considerations (including financial

considerations), lived-experience videos of North Carolina kin caregivers, videos with animated tips, audio conversations, and downloadable tip sheets and templates.

The website allows kin caregivers to explore their array of legal options in North Carolina at their own pace. The site contains information on informal agreements, power of attorney, becoming a licensed kinship foster parent, legal custody, guardianship, and adoption. The website also offers links and information in case the caregiver needs to find an attorney and additional resources.

A kin caregiver who is navigating the website can answer a few questions, designed to follow a flowchart sequence, that direct the caregiver to the most relevant information to them. The questions seek to determine if the child is already living with the caregiver, if there is child welfare involvement, how the child came to live with the caregiver, what type of documentation the caregiver has for the child, etc. From there, the website offers tailored videos, written materials, and other resources to educate the caregiver about their legal options.

This website is available to the public throughout the country but was designed specifically to support kin caregivers both inside and outside of the child welfare system in the state of North Carolina. The website also has a mobile-friendly option for those who prefer to use their phone or other mobile device.

Partnership and Collaboration

Creating a Family developed the website with financial support from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, as well as volunteer support from numerous subject matter experts, including attorneys, and relative caregivers with lived experience.

Effective collaboration is a key part of the ongoing work of this practice, because the website needs regular updates to ensure that the information stays relevant. In the first year after the launch of the website, Creating a Family staff worked with Department of Health and Human Services offices across North Carolina to encourage them to use and promote the website with kin caregivers in the formal child welfare system.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

The legal options website is a public website and does not track user data; therefore, there is no formal evaluation process of the website. However, Creating a Family holds legal clinics where they survey participants, many of whom utilize the website. There are two questions on the survey that ask participants if they have accessed the website and if they have found the information helpful. Creating a Family uses the information it gathers in this way to inform updates to the website. Staff members also reach out to families and professionals who utilize the website to get input on its effectiveness.

Kin caregivers are involved in the ongoing work of the legal options website through the survey results as well as through Creating a Family's kinship advisory committee, which meets quarterly. This committee is integral to keeping staff aware of new resources or trends within the kin caregiver space.

If someone notes out-of-date information on the website, it is immediately updated. If a new topic or resource is suggested, staff will meet to determine the workflow of how and when to incorporate new information. Additionally, Creating a Family Operations Director Cressa Megown does an in-depth annual review of the site to make sure it is current and matches any policy or practice changes in North Carolina.

Tips for Replication

Creating a Family staff members emphasize the importance of strong connections and community relations. These connections are vital for collecting and organizing information about legal services and ensuring it stays up to date.

Creating a Family has a small staff and was able to complete the website development portion of the project internally. The process lasted approximately six to eight months, but they had been laying the foundation with strategic partnerships in the community for a long time prior. Creating a Family staff members estimate that a website of this scale requires one full-time staff person to develop and update the website on an ongoing basis, with additional support staff if needed. Staff must be committed to maintaining and regularly reviewing the website.

Lastly, in addition to ongoing updates, Creating a Family recommends having one annual holistic review. They recognize the kinship space is actively changing and this cannot be a static resource.

Additional Practice Resources

To learn more about this practice, visit [Creating a Family's Legal Options for Kinship Caregivers webpage](#).

Statewide Legal Assistance – Legal Advice and Referral for Kinship Care (LAARK), King County Bar Association (Washington State)

Practice Description

Legal Advice and Referral for Kinship Care (LAARK) is a statewide legal advice and referral practice authorized and funded by the Washington state legislature to help kin caregivers address legal issues. The practice focuses on child custody, minor

guardianship, and other legal issues (such as education, housing, and public benefits) that kin caregivers face. LAARK does not represent caregivers in court but rather provides advice and other legal services, such as paperwork review and preparation, help preparing for court, and assistance with the filing of court documents. LAARK is exemplary not only because it is the first statewide legal advice and referral practice for kin caregivers in the country, but also because its minimal eligibility requirements provide a low barrier to entry and its no-cost, well-informed legal advice helps kin caregivers prepare for court.

There are very few eligibility requirements for a kin caregiver to receive assistance through LAARK. The caregiver must reside in the state of Washington, and the child must already be living with them. While LAARK does not have narrow eligibility requirements such as income or age restrictions, they do have criteria to help them determine who will get extensive services, such as assistance with court pleadings or long-term services. These criteria include priorities for families with geographic and language barriers, as well as priorities for cases with any safety issues for the child or family.

Caregivers connect with LAARK either through the public intake form on the website or through a phone call. Once the initial contact is made, they schedule an intake call, which takes approximately one hour. From there, kin caregivers receive consultation and advice from a LAARK attorney until the issue is considered resolved or a referral is made. Most participants have more than three contacts (phone and email) with LAARK. If they qualify for extensive services, there is more in-depth follow-up, typically through the end of the case. LAARK has helped over 800 kin caregivers in the state of Washington with their legal needs since its inception in 2023.

Partnership and Collaboration

LAARK was created with input from the Kinship Care Oversight Committee (KCOC), a long-standing, statutorily authorized committee in Washington State made up of kin caregivers, advocates, and other professionals who work with caregivers. LAARK Legal Aid Coordinator Celeste Miller attended a KCOC meeting and learned that the committee had been asking for legal services since its inception in 2002. LAARK continues to attend KCOC meetings and provides oral reports on its work. Input from caregivers on the KCOC directly informed some of the policies that LAARK has implemented, such as the decision that there would be no income limitations on eligibility.

LAARK does not represent caregivers in court, but they offer referrals to outside representation when needed. Legal representation for kin in Washington State is limited, but LAARK is able to refer to a firm that provides pro bono kin caregiver representation. Other valued partners across the state assist with paperwork or reviewing cases.

LAARK also has a list of private attorneys they work with and refer to if the kin caregiver would like to retain and pay for their own private attorney.

Additional essential partners include:

- ▶ Kinship navigators, who make referrals and have a good pulse on the needs of kin caregivers.
- ▶ The Office of Public Defense, which provides insight into how new laws intersect with dependency cases.
- ▶ The Pro Bono Council, which is a statewide network of 16 volunteer lawyer programs that provide various legal aid support to people with low incomes.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

After a case ends, LAARK sends out a survey to the kin caregiver they assisted. Although the response rate of 13% is relatively low, the results are overwhelmingly positive. As of April 2025, 97% of respondents agreed that it was easy to get in touch with LAARK and to get their help. Further, 94% agreed that their LAARK attorney took the time to understand the situation and clearly described their legal options, and 99% agreed that they would recommend LAARK to other kin caregivers with legal issues.

LAARK primarily uses survey results to determine the effectiveness of the program. They read through surveys every one to two months and determine if there are any areas of concern that need to be addressed; twice a year, they look at surveys more holistically to note any trends. LAARK reports that the biggest piece of feedback they get from surveys is from caregivers wishing they could have representation in court.

“[Before LAARK] we were disillusioned with the way things went and the amount of money we had spent for virtually nothing, that we were not willing to throw ourselves back in. The comfort that LAARK has given to us and [our granddaughter] is just phenomenal. I can’t say enough good about it.”

– Grandfather who used LAARK to help get legal custody of his grandchild

Apart from satisfaction surveys, LAARK also tracks case outcomes. If a kin caregiver is still in an ongoing legal case, LAARK will keep the referral open in their system even if they are no longer providing active help. Then, they check in with the caregiver at the end of the case to see if they obtained minor guardianship or had another outcome.

LAARK recently hired an additional staff member and plans to implement more robust case tracking.

Due to staff capacity, LAARK sometimes has to employ a waitlist. To meet the growing demand, LAARK plans to improve the resources they provide to clients, such as by developing a step-by-step trial brief following a fictional family through the court process. Additionally, staff would like to explore how technology, such as AI, could assist in case analysis.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Get buy-in from both legal aid connections and kinship care programs.** Staff members note that the Kinship Care Oversight Committee (KCOC) was key to forming LAARK. In addition to kin caregivers, the committee is made up of professionals from the Division of Children, Youth, and Families who work with kin caregivers inside the child welfare system, as well as kinship navigators who work with caregivers not in the child welfare system. A staff member comments, “They [kinship programs] give us so much advice and have a lot of knowledge about what kin caregivers need, they refer us clients, and they have relationships with legislatures.”
- ▶ **If implementing a statewide program, find community partners across the entire state.** LAARK notes that they have been able to serve 34 of the 39 counties in Washington because they have very strong rural partnerships. For example, LAARK has served multiple clients from Stevens County, a large county with many remote areas in Northeastern Washington, due to their strong relationship with the kinship navigator from Rural Resources, which serves that county and refers directly to LAARK. For reference, the Stevens County courthouse is 320 miles away from Seattle, where LAARK’s office is located. Since opening, LAARK has also served four clients from the least-populated county in Washington, Garfield County, which has a population of about 2,400 people. The Catholic Charities kinship navigator who serves Garfield County is very comfortable contacting LAARK and sending referrals. The Garfield County courthouse is 275 miles away from Seattle. In a larger state like Washington, rural partnerships are extremely valuable.

Additional Practice Resources

To learn more about this practice, visit [LAARK’s webpage](#) on the King County Bar Association website.

Learn More about the Network's Exemplary Practice Designation

If you have questions about any of the practices profiled here or are interested in learning more or replicating one of these practices, 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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