

Raising Awareness About Kinship Families Statewide



We are pleased to share profiles detailing two Exemplary kinship practices, both of which are effectively raising awareness about kinship families statewide:

- ▶ [Kinship Strong – Promoting Community Engagement – Family Education and Support Services \(Washington State\)](#)
- ▶ [A Statewide Kinship Commission – The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#)

These practices help grandfamilies by making them visible to policymakers and service providers throughout their state so that policies and community resources can reflect the families' unique strengths and needs. We encourage readers to consider how they can replicate these practices in their communities, and to [reach out to us for assistance](#).

Kinship Strong – Promoting Community Engagement – Family Education and Support Services (Washington State)

Practice Description

Kinship Strong – Promoting Community Engagement is a long-standing, community-rooted initiative led by Family Education and Support Services (FESS) that has shaped kinship awareness, policy conversations, and cross-system collaboration in Washington State for more than two decades. By intentionally centering the voices of kin caregivers and sustaining partnerships across systems, this exemplary practice has improved kinship families' visibility and access to resources and increased community accountability to kinship families.

As early as 2002—and continuing today—FESS recognized that kin caregivers often raise children with limited access to resources and little public or system recognition.

These challenges have intensified in recent years due to rising costs of living, increased caregiver age, and post-pandemic isolation, making intentional community engagement more critical than ever.

While this practice ultimately benefits all kinship families, it is intentionally designed to reach kin caregivers outside of the formal child welfare system—a population that is often invisible to traditional services and therefore less likely to access legal, financial, and emotional supports.

Partnership and Collaboration

This practice is guided by a Community Oversight Team composed of kin caregivers, advocates, state representatives, and service providers. Using a cross-system approach is foundational to effectively engaging the community and advancing meaningful change.

Kinship families are at the heart of this work. A cornerstone awareness-raising strategy is the annual Washington State Voices of Children Contest, which invites children being raised by kin to submit poems, essays, or original artwork sharing their lived experiences. This powerful campaign elevates youth voice while engaging the broader public and key decision-makers. Entries are reviewed by a cross-sector panel, and winners are celebrated publicly—often with recognition from the Governor’s Office and local leaders, as well as through social media outreach.

Over time, Voices of Children has increased public awareness of kinship families, informed policymakers, reduced stigma, and reinforced the importance of lived experience in shaping kinship systems. The visibility generated through this campaign has helped legitimize kinship experiences and strengthened both community and governmental support for kinship families.

Reflecting on the importance of caregiver voice, FESS Director Shelly Willis shared with staff from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: “The majority of the information we get about needs comes directly from our support groups and relative caregivers themselves. That motivates us to take action.”

FESS also maintains an active dialogue with professionals across child welfare, schools, aging services, the judiciary, the Washington State Legislature, and policy advocacy to identify systemic barriers and emerging opportunities. This strategy not only keeps the Kinship Team informed of policy and resource changes but also ensures kinship needs remain visible during periods of high system turnover. In addition, FESS intentionally cultivates relationships with community- and faith-based organizations, Tribal representatives, local businesses, healthcare providers, and community leaders who can provide concrete and culturally responsive supports to kinship families.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

Evaluating a practice grounded in awareness-building and community engagement requires a broad lens. FESS measures effectiveness by tracking policy milestones, systems changes, and practice innovations, alongside caregiver feedback and participation.

Documented outcomes include increased statewide recognition of kin caregivers, expanded judicial and court engagement in kinship education, integration of kinship perspectives into policy discussions, and intentional shifts in language (e.g., use of “kinship caregiver” rather than “licensed or unlicensed caregiver”).

Legislative and Practice Timeline

- ▶ 1998 – Legislative Foundations: House Bill 1121 (Permanent Legal Custody) allowed relatives to petition for custody without terminating parental rights. Senate Bill 5210 directed the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to prioritize relative placements when safe.
- ▶ 2000 – FESS Founded: Conducted community needs assessment identifying kin caregivers as a growing, underserved population.
- ▶ 2001 – State Investment: \$1 million in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding used to create the Relative Support Services Fund; \$50,000 for a statewide kinship care study.
- ▶ 2002 – Cross-System Leadership: Partnered with DSHS, Casey Family Programs, and others; formed Kinship Caregiver Oversight Committee; launched Voices of Children.
- ▶ 2004 – Kinship Caregivers Support Program (KCSP): \$500,000 in annual funding for kin caregivers not in child welfare; two pilot Kinship Navigator projects launched.
- ▶ 2006–2007 – Expansion: Legislative funding expanded Kinship Navigator Program; FESS launched navigators including bilingual services, therapeutic support partnerships, teen groups, and strengthened school collaborations.

Tips for Replication

Shelly recommends that organizations interested in replicating Kinship Strong – Promoting Community Engagement begin by listening to the kin caregivers they serve—or hope to serve—rather than making assumptions about needs. She notes that building trust requires time, consistency, and shared leadership.

Additional tips are listed on the following page.

- ▶ Establish a standing, caregiver-led advisory or oversight group.
- ▶ Invest in sustained relationship-building across systems (courts, schools, aging services).
- ▶ Use creative, public-facing strategies—such as art, storytelling, and youth voice—to raise awareness and reduce stigma.
- ▶ Track milestones and stories of change, not solely participation numbers.

A Statewide Kinship Commission – The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Practice Description

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren serves as a resource to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on issues affecting grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends who are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. While the practice of having a statewide commission on kinship/grandfamilies is not unique, the Commonwealth’s Commission is an exemplary practice because it was legislatively created as “a permanent commission” in a 2008 law, requires appointments from across governmental systems, and has dedicated staff.

The Commission’s fifteen members are: three people appointed by the secretary of elder affairs, one of whom is from the secretary’s office; one person appointed by the commissioner of children and families, who is from the department; two people appointed by the governor; two people appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives, one of whom is a member of the house; one person appointed by the house minority leader; two people appointed by the president of the senate, one of whom is a member of the senate; one person appointed by the senate minority leader; one person appointed by the attorney general; and two people appointed by chief justices, one by the chief justice of the probate and family court and one by the chief justice of the juvenile court, both of whom have “demonstrated a commitment to the rearing of grandchildren by grandparents.”

Commission members drive advocacy initiatives to improve services and resources for kinship families across the Commonwealth. Among their successes, they helped to secure a streamlined path for kin caregivers applying for child-only grants through the Commonwealth’s TANF program, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), to receive a “good cause exemption.” This exemption allows grandfamilies and kinship families to receive a child-only stipend without authorizing the

Commonwealth to collect child support from the child's parents. The use of this federally allowed exemption is an important strategy to ensure kin caregivers can receive ongoing support to meet the child's needs without concern that they will harm or disadvantage the child's parents.

While The Commission focuses on broad system reforms, it also raises awareness about issues important to kin caregivers and educates the community about kinship families through its website and newsletter. The Commission maintains a comprehensive listing of support groups, coordinates a network of support group facilitators, and provides information to kinship families. In addition to hosting an annual conference and other events, The Commission ensures that timely and accurate data is available for service providers and elected officials.

The Commission receives an annual appropriation from the Commonwealth to fund programs and services, with additional funding coming from a grant from the Massachusetts Council on Aging. The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) is The Commission's fiscal partner, providing two full-time staff members who are employed by DCF but who are delegated to serve kin caregivers across the entire state on behalf of The Commission.

In 2022, The Commission created a nonprofit organization that supports its work, allowing it to access philanthropic funds available only to nonprofit organizations. The Commission received a grant in 2024, funded in part by opioid settlement funds, for programming and community outreach.

Partnership and Collaboration

The Commission facilitates cross-system and legislative collaboration to benefit kinship families. Caregiver leadership and engagement are central to The Commission's work, and the current board chair is a kin caregiver. Recognizing the volume of interest among kin caregivers across the Commonwealth in contributing to this work, The Commission established an Advisory Board, comprised mostly of kin caregivers who provide recommendations and feedback to The Commission.

DCF is the fiscal agent for The Commission and therefore a key partner. The Commission also partners with a range of public and private service providers and community organizations across the Commonwealth, including the kinship navigator program, the executive office of elder affairs, councils on aging, family resource centers, the juvenile courts, and the probate and family courts. The Commission hosts regional roundtables for these partners to facilitate cross-system collaboration focused on assessing caregiver needs, sharing information, facilitating learning, and strategizing on enhancing services for kinship families.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

Annual focus groups with kin caregivers and the regional partner roundtables provide The Commission with anecdotal information – such as personal stories, observations, and testimonials – that indicate that The Commission is effective. This information also informs practice improvements and helps The Commission identify future advocacy opportunities. Plans are underway to implement a new database that will monitor trends and document feedback.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Before approaching the state legislature to create a commission, it is critical to conduct listening tours across the state to understand caregiver strengths, challenges, and needs.** It is important to be well-informed about the landscape and clear on how a commission can make a difference for families and save taxpayer dollars.
- ▶ **Bring the appointing authorities and cross-system collaborators to the table early on.** Early engagement from partners will demonstrate how a commission can bring together agencies across the human services spectrum to eliminate silos that kin caregivers often experience on their caregiving journeys.
- ▶ **Obtain funding to hire dedicated commission staff members and determine staffing needs based on the size of the state, the size of the service population, services planned, and anticipation of service expansion over time.** If your staffing requirements do not include legal experience, it is a good idea to have access to legal expertise on an ongoing basis.
- ▶ **As you think about structuring the commission, consider whether it is best to have a state-sponsored commission and/or an independent nonprofit supporting the commission.** A state-sponsored commission may have recognized credibility or standing in the state, while an independent entity can engage in advocacy and fundraising.

Additional Practice Resources

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

- ▶ [The Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren website](#)
- ▶ The [text of the law](#) establishing The Commission and outlining its responsibilities and how its members should be appointed

Learn More about the Network's Exemplary Practice Designation

If you have questions about either 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.

The Network is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$9,950,000 with 95 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and \$523,684 and 5 percentage funded by non-government sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

© Generations United, 2026

The Network is a project of
Generations United.

**generations
United**

Because we're stronger together®