

Implementing Kin-First Child Welfare Strategies



We are pleased to share profiles detailing four Exemplary kinship practices, all of which are effectively implementing kin-first child welfare strategies:

- ▶ [Centering Tribal Values in Training – Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council \(Montana\)](#)
- ▶ [Diligent Search and Engagement – Kinnect \(Ohio\)](#)
- ▶ [Kin-First Culture Improvements – ChildNet \(Florida\)](#)
- ▶ [Kinship Straight Adopt \(Kin-Specific Adoption\) – Arrow Child & Family Ministries \(Texas\)](#)

These practices help caregivers by inspiring shifts in the attitudes and approaches of service professionals, agencies, and organizations to better center and respond to the needs of kinship families. We encourage readers to consider how they can replicate these practices in their communities, and to [reach out to us for assistance](#).

Centering Tribal Values in Training – Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council (Montana)

Practice Description

To help professionals who train kin caregivers, Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council updated an existing training curriculum. The modified train-the-trainers practice is called Circle of Keepers: Caregiver Training to Foster Cultural and Community Connections. At the heart of Circle of Keepers is a love for children and a desire to protect Tribal legacies. The symbolism of the circle reflects sacredness, protection, healing, balance, and wholeness in caregiving. Training participants gather in a sacred circle of keepers to honor and respect a collective learning space and to embody a continuity of learning from generations of cultural teachings and knowledge of being a caregiver. The idea is to cultivate a natural, protective circle of care.

This training practice is exemplary because it embeds, emphasizes, and elevates Native history and culture and Tribal values. By centering Tribal values, the training strengthens Tribal child welfare programs; revitalizes traditional kinship practices; and honors relational, community-centered approaches to train and support caregivers, extended family systems, and

intergenerational care. It reframes kin caregiver support, shifting the paradigm from one centered on a service that is delivered to kinship families to one that is grounded in a relationship that is nurtured and based on respect and reciprocity. The practice uplifts and restores the cultural foundations that have sustained caregiving in Native communities since long ago.

The training is guided by four principles rooted in cultural foundations:

- ▶ **Honoring Our Roots:** Understand the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma to recognize resiliency as a pathway for cultural healing to strengthen children, youth, families, and communities.
- ▶ **Promoting Shared Learning:** Reclaim knowledge of traditional caregiving roles and strengthen them through connections to kin, culture, and community.
- ▶ **Building Relational Connections:** Value caregiver support through systemic partnering, mentorship from experienced caregivers, elder guidance, and community outreach.
- ▶ **Shaping Hopeful Futures:** Move beyond a Western framework of foster care and kinship care by centering caregiving in Indigenous knowledge, teachings, and healing practices.

Sessions focused on each principle are experiential to cultivate the skills of Tribal social service and child welfare staff in facilitating and training kin caregivers.

The training is intentionally designed to be flexible and adaptable. Sessions can be facilitated one-on-one or in a classroom setting. Tribal Nations can tailor the curriculum, presentation materials, videos, and activities they receive to their existing kin caregiver training to reflect their traditions, cultural beliefs, parenting practices, and kinship structures. The process of local adaptation invites Tribal elders, knowledge keepers, and cultural and language departments to be a part of customizing the training to ensure kinship families in their community are honored, respected, and well supported.

Partnership and Collaboration

Several Tribal and Native-serving organizations have helped develop and implement the Circle of Keepers training, ensuring the practice is localized and culturally grounded, community-informed, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of caregivers of children and youth involved in the child welfare system.

Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council utilized funding from a Bureau of Indian Affairs Child Welfare grant to support the revision and update of an existing training curriculum that resulted in the current version of the training. The update integrated resources on the impact of trauma and culturally relevant concepts while ensuring the practice remained reflective of the spiritual and linguistic diversity of Native peoples.

In addition, an academic partnership with the University of Oklahoma and their role in evaluating Circle of Keepers has strengthened the continuous quality improvement process by grounding it in both empirical methods and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

Tribal child welfare staff who complete the Circle of Keepers training also complete an evaluation that seeks feedback on relevance, clarity, cultural resonance, and perceived impact on practice. Training evaluations are reviewed and inform continuous improvement of the practice.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Involve your culture department in adapting the practice and related training materials** to tailor them to reflect your Tribe's specific traditions, values, and teachings and help kinship families feel supported, honored, and respected.
- ▶ **Consider partnering with other Tribes in your area to pool funding and share costs**, especially if your Tribe has limited funding for training.
- ▶ **Embed Circle of Keepers into staff onboarding processes and training.** Have multiple staff members attend the train-the-trainer training so that multiple people can serve as co-facilitators of the kin caregiver training.
- ▶ **Engage other Tribal programs in peer sharing** to foster a network of mutual learning and innovation to implement the practice.
- ▶ **Recognize that changes in Tribal, federal, or state child welfare policies may shift funding priorities, placement preferences, or administrative burdens that affect Native caregivers.** Monitor how this may impact training needs and adjust the training content as necessary so that it reflects legal and administrative changes.

Additional Practice Resources

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

- ▶ [Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council](#)
- ▶ [National Training Center for Indigenous Skills and Services](#)

Diligent Search and Engagement – Kinnect (Ohio)

Practice Description

Kinnect, a nonprofit organization in Ohio, utilizes its Kinnect to Family® (KTF) practice to identify and engage kinship connections for children and youth. This practice is exemplary because it

successfully finds safe placements for children with relatives or close family friends while also helping the children build their natural support networks and long-term connections.

This practice emphasizes urgency, using the first 24 hours to intensively reach out to primary contacts for the child, including parents, siblings, and maternal and paternal aunts/uncles and grandparents. A family search and engagement specialist employs a variety of resources and tools to identify additional family members and other kin, including searching social media and other online search tools and databases, such as Accurint or Clear. The specialist attempts to conduct their searches up to the fourth generation, with the goal of identifying 60 to 80 kin per child. Generating an extensive genogram, which is a powerful tool for family searching, helps the specialist map out all the child's potential supports. The practice also engages other people connected to the child to seek information about their relationship and additional connections. Further, KTF engages youth in identifying their own connections through permanency exploration strategies.

The KTF practice couples its diligent search strategies with engagement strategies to approach kinship connections and build rapport with them. The specialist explores each person's relationship with the child and tries to have discussions with as many connections as possible about how they can be a part of the child's supportive kinship network or provide a formal kinship placement. Staff members then develop a roadmap to create a full support plan to stabilize connections and caregiving arrangements.

All specialists and supervisors attend a three-day training to learn how to implement the diligent search and engagement practice. The training is supplemented by ongoing supportive coaching through a weekly consultation structure called 30 Minutes to Support. Specialists also receive a diligent search guide that includes a list of helpful online search tools, resources, and websites.

The KTF practice has been used across the state of Ohio for over five years. Since 2018, 1,675 children have been placed with kin. On average, the practice has identified 107 kin connections per child.

Partnership and Collaboration

Kinnect has ongoing partnerships with Ohio's Department of Children and Youth and Casey Family Programs. Additionally, Ohio is a state where child welfare services are county-administered, and Kinnect has built partnerships with 41 public children services agencies across the state. Each of those 41 agencies has a formal memorandum of understanding to implement the KTF practice. Furthermore, Ohio START, a public-private partnership that has a program to empower families affected by substance use disorders, also partners with Kinnect to apply this practice, seeking to build a network of kinship support for parents who have substance use disorders and an open child welfare case.

Collaboration amongst the KTF team members is a key to success. They use a co-creative process to ensure the diligent search and engagement strategies are tailored to the cultures of the families served.

The development of the KTF practice was informed by the 30 Days to Family Model®, which was created by The Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition in St. Louis, Missouri.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

All kin caregivers identified through KTF receive a survey. The survey is administered by a third-party evaluation team that provides feedback to Kinnect so it can refine its practice.

KTF has a formal continuous quality improvement (CQI) framework that includes constant sampling, an annual fidelity review, and quarterly site reviews. The team holds monthly CQI meetings to review data, elevate best practices, and identify areas for improvement. They then utilize Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles, root cause analyses, road tests, and small tests to explore and improve the practice. The KTF team develops biannual CQI agendas to help maintain focus on a specific area for improvement. For example, they designed an implementation support structure that uses coaching and mentoring to share observations with specialists to provide real-time feedback and recommendations for practice improvement. In addition, each specialist's diligent search and engagement strategies are assessed as a part of their annual fidelity review, which is a structured process to ensure core components and strategies of the practice are being followed as intended.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Build in best practices for youth engagement that position youth as the central part of the family search and engagement process.** Tools that KTF has used include Circles of Support, mobility mapping, and naturally connected questions, which is part of the Family Finding practice of Pale Blue, Inc.
- ▶ **Take into account cultural considerations when developing this practice.** When possible, hire specialists who live in and represent the communities where you will implement this practice.
- ▶ **Provide extensive training and coaching to help family specialists in their role.** The practice should also be supported by an infrastructure that equips the team with tools, such as modern search technology, manuals, practice profiles, sample social media scripts, and efficient databases for documenting and tracking information.
- ▶ **Consider using this practice with families that are not involved with child welfare.** Even when children are in a stable placement with kin, they can benefit from an expanded network of support.

- ▶ **Be prepared to adapt the practice to serve families who are on different paths**, whether they receive preventive services, need a kinship placement, or are experiencing congregate care.

Additional Practice Resources

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

- ▶ [Kinnect to Family](#)
- ▶ [Kinnect to Family Genograms](#)
- ▶ [How Kinnect to Family Works \(video\)](#)

Kin-First Culture Improvements – ChildNet (Florida)

Practice Description

When the state of Florida established a goal of ensuring that kinship placements account for at least 60% of all foster care placements, ChildNet understood that working toward that objective would require a shift in kinship search and engagement practices. Having already realized the benefits of kinship care for children and youth, they were ready to take on this challenge. They knew that, in order to improve their practice, they needed an organizational commitment to creating and supporting a culture where kinship search and engagement were top priorities that required action the moment a child was referred to the agency.

ChildNet's practice of improving their kin-first culture is exemplary because it requires a multi-faceted approach, including:

- ▶ Obtaining buy-in from the board of directors, leadership, and kinship champions across the agency, all of whom have committed to supporting a kin-first culture and implementing the practice.
- ▶ Addressing bias both inside and outside the organization and providing education on the benefits of placing children with kin.
- ▶ Equipping all staff and partners with effective kin-finding toolkits, resources, and protocols.
- ▶ Training staff on kin caregiver search and engagement strategies and making kinship training required for new case managers as well as part of the normal training cycle.
- ▶ Creating a foundation for successful implementation and monitoring by employing dedicated family-finding staff and establishing cross-departmental workgroups, policies

and protocols, action planning, weekly reporting, and bi-weekly performance review meetings.

ChildNet provides kinship services in two counties, in partnership with the Florida Department of Children and Families, and generally receives cases within 72 hours of a child's removal from their home. Initially, ChildNet's Family Finding unit focuses on identifying kin caregivers and achieving a long-term kinship placement within 90 days while concurrently identifying an extended kinship support network for the child. After meeting with the investigations team to gather initial information, the family finder attends a family team meeting to identify kin and creates a Family Finding Connections Log that becomes a living document throughout the process. Kinship champions, multidisciplinary workgroups, and weekly performance review meetings ensure that roadblocks to identifying kin are addressed promptly and the team remains focused on meeting its placement goal.

Once an appropriate relative or non-relative kin caregiver is identified, they can go through Florida's level 1 licensure process, which is designed for kin caregivers. Once licensed, they can receive a board rate and support from a caseworker.

ChildNet developed a family-search training that they provide to all new case managers and family-finding specialists. It is centered around the use of their comprehensive Relative & Non-Relative Caregiver Engagement Guide. The training includes the development of practice skills through role-playing exercises. Additionally, all agency staff members can access up-to-date resources on an internal SharePoint site. This space, a product of the kin-first culture improvements practice, contains commonly used and referenced documents, guides, and workgroup activities, as well as links to webinars and newsletters.

ChildNet's strategic plan, developed and directed by its board of directors, has three goals, one of which is to increase kinship placements. This signifies that building, sustaining, and reinforcing a kin-first culture are priorities across all agency departments.

Partnership and Collaboration

Florida mandated the privatization of foster care and related services and transitioned to a community-based care (CBC) model 20 years ago. In this model, the state contracts with local nonprofits to manage foster care and related services, under the supervision of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF). As one of the lead agencies for community-based care in the state of Florida, ChildNet has the responsibility of building and maintaining strong partnerships with government agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve kinship families. A kin-first culture is built inside of an organization, but achieving lasting kin-first outcomes necessitates collaboration with partners that prioritize kinship placements and ongoing support.

DCF facilitates a child's initial placement before transferring the case to ChildNet. Some family searches are conducted by ChildNet and some by DCF, so coordinating services, reporting,

problem solving, and practice fidelity are important. Additionally, ChildNet subcontracts with community-based family service organizations that conduct support groups and provide other support to help kin caregivers navigate the caregiving journey.

In 2022, ChildNet was selected to receive support from the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) Child and Family Wellbeing Accelerator program. GPL helped ChildNet build their kin-first culture by assisting with practice design, resource and protocol development, and implementation.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

ChildNet measures their success with improving their kin-first culture by consistently evaluating performance data. Weekly reports provide data on the number of children placed with kin caregivers, outcomes related to placement stability and permanency, and the number of children who still need a kinship placement. Efforts are made to provide feedback constantly and in real time, especially with newer cases, so that modifications can be made to the family search efforts. Performance and report card meetings provide a forum for teams to review what is working and consider making practice improvements. The CQI department created a targeted review tool that they use to evaluate kinship search success for individual cases, providing feedback for family-finding specialists and supervisors to use to improve performance.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Obtain buy-in from leadership**, including your organization's board of directors and executive management team or your agency's top career officials and political appointees, on building and supporting a kin-first culture. This will help you convey the significance of a culture shift across the organization/agency and commit the organization/agency to investing in the development and implementation of the practice.
- ▶ **Build a team of kinship champions** from across departments in your agency/organization to support the practice and celebrate wins. ChildNet has "go-to" kinship staff members in operations, CQI, intake and placement, licensing and case management, and other departments. Ongoing kin-first conversations with both staff and community partners help achieve high kinship placement rates and maintain interest and commitment over the long term.
- ▶ **Once you are given the responsibility of identifying a long-term kinship placement, adopt the "first placement is the best placement" concept.** Highly trained staff members who are well-equipped with the proper resources will be able to conduct thorough and culturally appropriate kin caregiver searches at the onset of a case.
- ▶ **Recognize the differences in cultures and kinship family needs and circumstances.** Plan to implement inclusive and culturally appropriate kin search practices that will lead to the best placement and permanency outcomes for each unique family.

- ▶ **Clearly define your success criteria and celebrate wins.** By continually monitoring and reporting on performance, you will keep your staff focused on achieving your kinship goals and ensuring continuous practice improvement.
- ▶ **Be prepared to address and eliminate bias against kinship placements,** which you will likely encounter both inside and outside of the organization/agency. Use training, data sharing, conversations, and messaging to educate your staff and community and emphasize why this practice is an organizational/agency priority.
- ▶ **Create an organizational/agency statement that explains why you believe in a kin-first culture.** ChildNet's is:

Placements with kin (relatives & non-relatives) enable children to maintain stronger connections to family, community, and culture; reduce trauma; improve time to permanency, reducing their length of stay under protective supervision; and are associated with fewer placement changes for children. Staff should take a 'kin-first' approach by continuing to inquire about and explore the families' existing ties and building upon the strengths and assets of family and community members.

Additional Practice Resources

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

- ▶ [A Guide to Finding and Engaging Relative and Non-Relative Caregivers](#)
- ▶ [Family Finding Connections Log](#)

Kinship Straight Adopt (Kin-Specific Adoption) – Arrow Child & Family Ministries (Texas)

Practice Description

Arrow Child & Family Ministries created their Kinship Straight Adopt (KSA) practice to address a long-standing gap in the child welfare system: the lack of an efficient, supportive, kinship-centered pathway for kin caregivers who wish to adopt children in their care without first becoming licensed foster parents. Arrow listened to the needs of their community's kinship families to create a streamlined, exemplary kin-specific adoption process that supports caregivers who want to provide a permanent, loving home for their kin.

Adoption from foster care is historically a paperwork- and training-heavy process, often requiring full foster-care licensure in addition to adoption requirements. However, for kin caregivers who want to adopt from foster care, a foster care license is not always needed; rather, the caregiver needs kin-specific adoption training and a streamlined approach for adoption verification.

Recognizing that there were general foster care requirements that were irrelevant to kinship adoptive parents, Arrow Child & Family Ministries implemented their KSA practice in 2023. The key differences between KSA training and Arrow's full foster care pre-service training are the number of required training hours, the delivery format, and the scope of topics. KSA is designed to reduce unnecessary barriers to kinship families by streamlining the paperwork process and utilizing kin-specific training while still ensuring that each kin caregiver receives high-quality, trauma-informed preparation to care long-term for the child. Some kinship families are encouraged to receive additional or specialized training, depending upon the child's needs.

To successfully implement this practice, Arrow has specialized staff, called Family Engagement Specialists (FESs) and Kinship Family Home Developers (Kinship FHDs), who are trained to work with kin caregivers. When referrals come from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) kinship unit, Kinship FHDs and FESs step in to help. The assigned Kinship FHD maintains a family's file and keeps the family informed about the training and paperwork they need to complete for the adoption. The assigned FES completes a needs assessment with the family to determine how to support the family in getting verified for adoption. Arrow can do minor home repairs; pay for items such as fire extinguishers and medication lock boxes; and/or help the family fill out applications for other assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The FES serves as an added layer of support to help the family through the adoption verification process. Once the family has completed all requirements, they are assigned a home study contractor for the final step of approval to adopt.

Since the implementation of this practice in 2023, Arrow has approved over 100 kinship families for adoption, and they currently have over 345 kinship families across the state of Texas in process to be approved for adoption. They work with any kinship family with an open DFPS case where the child's case goal is adoption by a relative. Approximately 45% of the kinship families are white, 37.5% are Hispanic or Latino, and 18% are Black/African American. Socioeconomically, most kinship families served fall within lower- to middle-income brackets, with many caregivers being grandparents, great-grandparents, or extended relatives who only have limited, hourly employment or live on fixed incomes from retirement or disability payments.

The KSA practice continues to grow steadily, with positive feedback from kin caregivers and caseworkers who have observed faster permanency outcomes and higher caregiver satisfaction compared to traditional foster-to-adopt pathways.

Partnership and Collaboration

Arrow's primary partnership is with the local DFPS kinship workers. These workers provide referrals to Arrow and collaborate in doing joint home visits with Arrow staff. Additionally, Arrow has valuable community partners, including those that may have tangible items for kinship families, such as washing machines or furniture, and, in one location, a partnership with a local fire inspector who can complete virtual fire inspections.

Arrow receives ongoing feedback from kin caregivers on the adoption verification process. Based on feedback, staff members have implemented changes to streamline the process and make the checklist of requirements less overwhelming for kin. Additionally, when staff noted that the traditional orientation class was not serving kin caregivers as well as they would like, they solicited feedback from kin caregivers to learn what information kin caregivers would find helpful. They then incorporated this feedback into a kin-specific orientation.

Evidence and Continuous Quality Improvement

Arrow measures the effectiveness the KSA practice based on the number of children achieving permanency. Arrow has seen that number steadily increase since the program was implemented in 2023. In 2023, they licensed five kinship families and finalized the adoptions of five kids. In 2024, they licensed 46 kinship families to adopt 53 children. In 2025, they licensed 74 families to adopt 104 children.

Arrow has received consistent feedback from kinship families expressing gratitude for the hands-on support, especially around overcoming challenges with paperwork, technology, and access to basic needs. Families also shared how meaningful it is to be supported by staff with lived experience, and to receive culturally and economically responsive care throughout the process. This qualitative feedback, alongside the data, demonstrates both the heart and impact of the practice.

Tips for Replication

- ▶ **Examine which adoption requirements come from the state and which are an agency/organization preference.** Drill down policies and procedures and make the list of requirements for kinship adoptions tailored and safety-focused, while still maintaining the integrity of the home review.
- ▶ **Train all staff on the importance of being kin first and hire staff with lived experience who work exclusively with kin.**
- ▶ **Build a diverse team** in terms of educational background, lived experience, race, gender, etc. Arrow has two Family Engagement Specialists who speak Spanish and one staff member who knows American Sign Language. They also partner with an interpretation network that does translation for families who speak French or Swahili.
- ▶ **Immerse yourself in learning about kinship families** – trainings, resources, and books. One staff member notes, “If you’re going to do this work and do it right, you need to commit.”

Additional Practice Resources

To learn more about this practice, review the links on the following page.

- ▶ [Arrow Adoption Training for Kinship](#)
- ▶ [Kinship FAQ](#)
- ▶ [Kinship Foster Care FAQ Packet](#)

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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