

How Washington State is Reshaping Kin Search and Engagement

September 14, 2026

- Welcome, we will begin at the top of the hour
- Please type in the **chat** box - your name, state, tribe (if applicable), and role
- Type questions in the **chat** box at any point during our time together
- **We will provide a separate meeting link for a 30-minute Q&A with our presenters, starting in an hour, at 3 PM ET**
- By the end of the week, all participants will receive a link to the slides and the recording

Who We Are & How We Help



Learning Collaboratives and Information Dissemination

The Network hosts [webinars](#) and facilitates learning collaboratives.



A Centralized Hub

The Network is elevating exemplary kinship/grandfamily practices and programs from around the country.



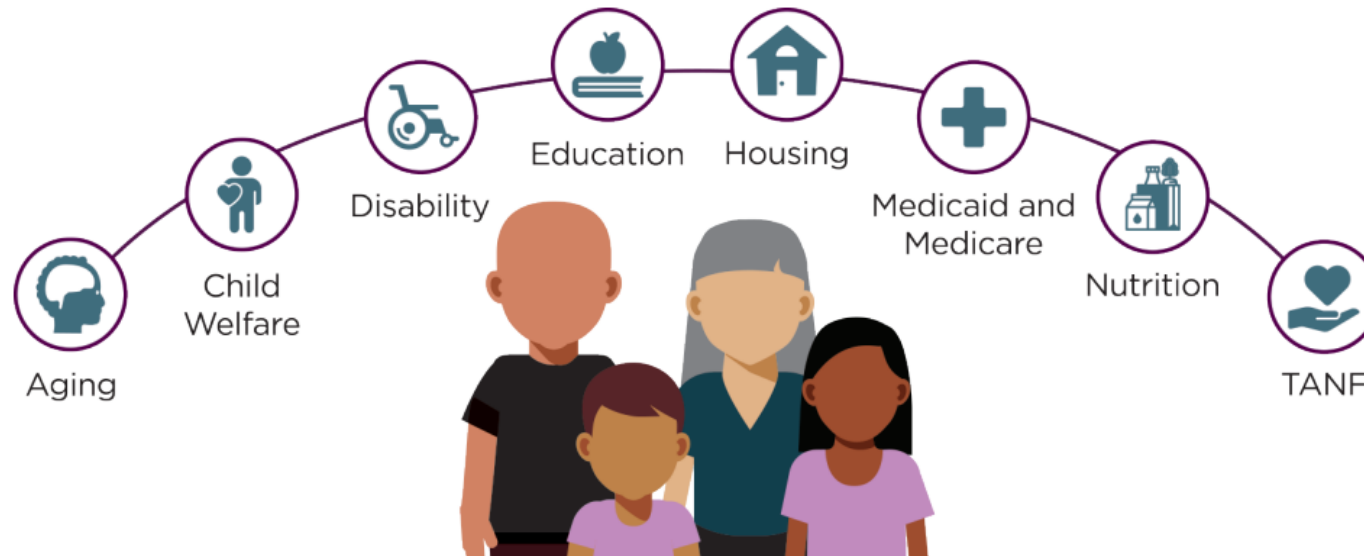
Bridging Systems for Kinship Families

The Network is helping Idaho, San Diego County, and Oneida Nation of Wisconsin optimize their collaborative approaches and improve their services. Solutions will be replicable for others.



Individual Assistance

We respond to [individual requests for help](#) from government agencies and nonprofit organizations.



GKSNetwork.org

Welcome Our Presenters

- **Chelsea Griffin**, MSW, LICSW, Policy Administrator, Child Welfare Programs and Practice, Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- **Geene Delaplane**, Ph.D., Kinship Care and Guardianship Program Manager, Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- **Katrina Lanahan**, Principal UX Researcher, Bloom Works Child Welfare Playbook Team

Kin Engagement Toolkit

- Ask Children and Youth about Their Kin
- Use an Expansive Legal Definition of Kin
- Document and Track Kin Connections
- Include Placement and Recruitment Teams in Case Planning
- Assign Someone to be Dedicated to Engaging Kin
- Use Social Media and other Contact Methods to Engage Kin
- Involve Kin Before Removing Children or Youth
- Make a Plan to Keep Youth Connected to Their Supportive Adults
- Use Court Hearings as Checkpoints for Kin Engagement
- Create Life Books for Children and Youth in Care
- And more



Washington State DCYF Spotlight on Kinship

Strengthening Relative and Kin Engagement Through:
Policy, Practice, Data, and Continuous Improvement

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CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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www.dcyf.wa.gov



Agenda Slide

- **Where Washington Started**
- **What Drove the Change**
- **Creating a Shared Strategy**
- **Building the Supports**
- **Strengthening Engagement**
- **Connecting and Sustaining the System**
- **What We Learned Along the Way**
- **Where We Are Now and What Comes Next**

Where We Started: Washington's Kinship Baseline 2021

37.38% of children and youth entering care were initially placed with a relative.

48.50% of children and youth in care were in a kinship placement.

5.83% of exits from care were to guardianship.

Source: DCYF, OIAA, OIAA Reporting Portal, Entries, Exits and Out of Home Care, Relative v Non-Relative
Data as of: Point In Time: 01-01-2021



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What Drove the Change.

The Three L's:

- Leadership
- Legislation
- Lawsuits



Kin-First Legislation and Court Actions

2021: Remove Barriers and Support Kin Placements

HB 1227 - Keeping Families Together Act

Strengthened expectations to place children with relatives and suitable persons whenever safe and appropriate.

Created the foundation for the Initial License and financial support for kinship caregivers.



SB 5151 - Child- Specific License (Kinship License)

Created a licensing pathway for relatives and suitable persons caring for a specific child.

Reduced barriers that prevented kinship caregivers from becoming licensed foster parents.





Kin-First Legislation and Court Actions

2022: Kinship Becomes the Preferred Path

In re Dependency of K.W. (Washington Supreme Court)

- Reinforced that relatives and kinship caregivers must receive meaningful preference for placement throughout dependency proceedings.
- Increased expectations for ongoing relative searches and consideration of family connections.

HB 1747 - Supporting Relative Placements in Child Welfare Proceedings

- Reinforced relatives as the preferred placement and permanency resource.
- Required ongoing consideration of guardianship as an alternative to termination of parental rights.
- Added protections against unnecessary moves from relative placements.

D.S. Settlement

- Committed DCYF to system improvements designed to strengthen child safety, well-being, and family connections.
 - Led to the creation and expansion of kinship engagement improvements
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Kin-First Legislation and Court Actions

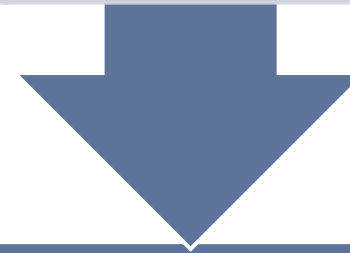
2023: Expand Permanency and Licensing Supports

ESSB 5124 - Guardianship Assistance Program Expansion (State funded GAP)

Created eligibility for
state-funded
guardianship
assistance regardless
of Title IV-E status.

Expanded access to
guardianship as a
permanency option for
licensed caregivers.

Established the
framework for the state-
funded Guardianship
Assistance Program
(GAP).



Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Final Rule Kinship Licensing

Authorized states to establish
separate licensing standards for
kinship caregivers.

Opened the door for Washington's
kinship-specific licensing standards
and streamlined licensing process.

DS Settlement: Catalyst for Kin-First Change

D.S. Lawsuit and Settlement Agreement

Why It Mattered for Kinship

- Reinforced the importance of identifying and engaging family early.
- Highlighted the need for ongoing family engagement throughout the life of a case.
- Encouraged stronger supports for relatives and kinship caregivers.
- Elevated family, culture, belonging, and youth voice as key considerations in case planning.



D.S. Settlement 4.10: Kinship Engagement

Family Engagement

- Ongoing engagement with relatives, trusted adults, and extended family.

Resource Information

- Information about available supports and services.

Peer Support and System Navigation

- Helping families overcome barriers and access resources.

Licensure Guidance

- Supporting relatives and kin through the licensing process.

Placement Support

- Assisting relatives and kin with placement requirements and approvals.





Creating a Shared Strategy.

Bloomworks Assessment
Turning Agency Vision into Action
Kinship Steering Committee



Bloom's Role Partnership in the Partnership

[KinReport.pdf](#)

DCYF lead the work:

- Set the vision and direction
- Brought policy and practice expertise
- Led implementation
- Made agency decisions

Bloom supported the work:

- Assessed the kinship system: [KinReport.pdf](#)
- Gathered staff, youth, and caregiver input.
- ID strengths, gaps, and opportunities
- Supported planning and coordination
- Helped connect work already underway



Turning Kin-First Direction into Action

Prioritizing

- Prioritizing relatives and non-related kin placements

Reducing

- Reducing licensing barriers

Expanding

- Expanding financial support for kinship caregivers

Strengthening

- Strengthening kinship engagement practices

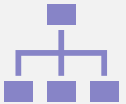
Increasing

- Increasing permanency options through guardianship

Creating

- Creating a continuum of support from placement through permanency

Kinship Steering Committee



Cross-Divisional Committee – took place over the course of a 1.5 years



Purpose: To strengthen support available to relatives and kin while streamlining process to keep children/youth in care safe. Provide support to caseworkers.



Staff voice included





Building the Supports.

Kinship licensing options

Unlocking financial support

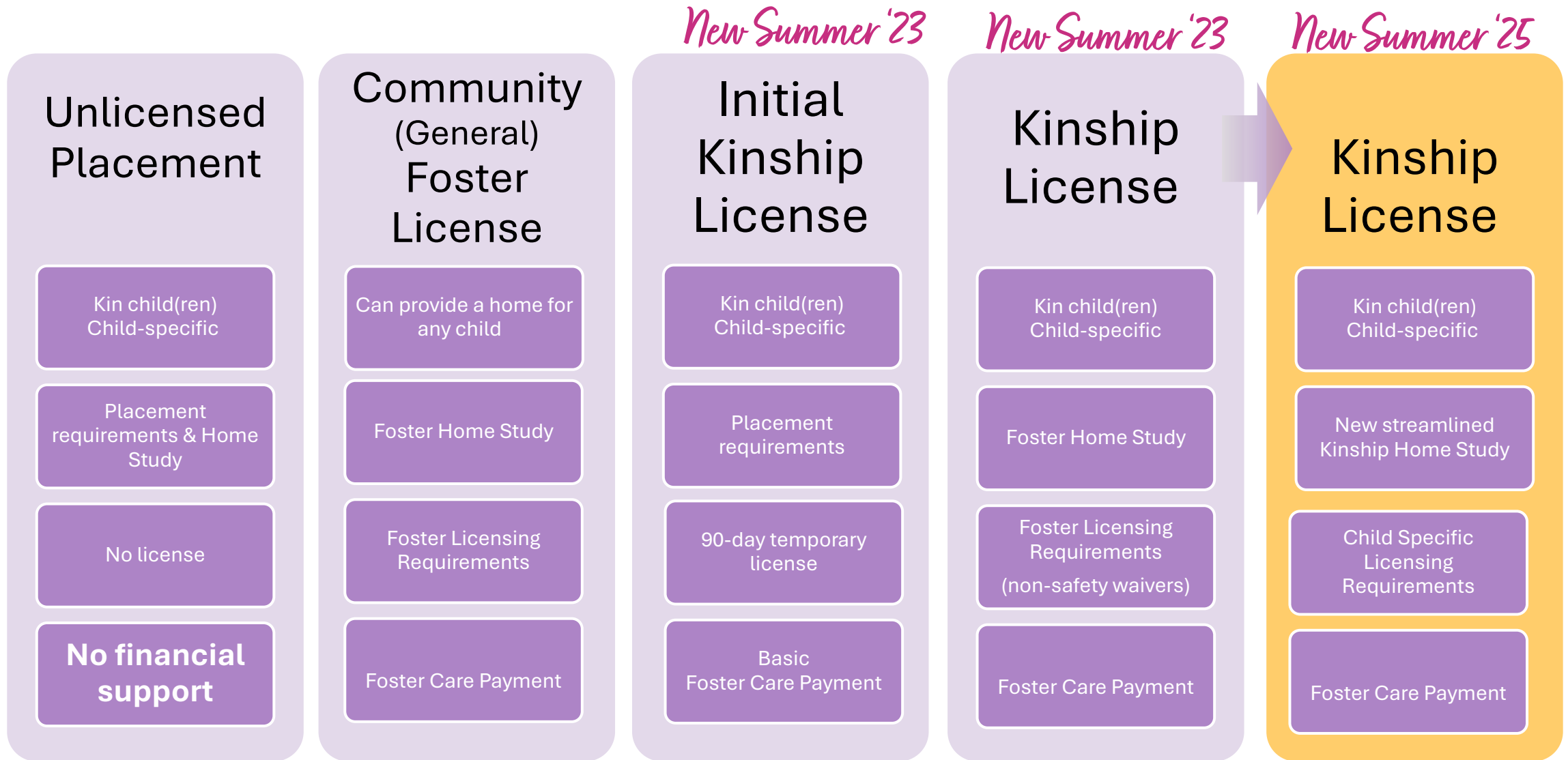
Caregiver Supports Phase 1 & 2

Kinship caregiver guide

Guardianship and relational permanency



TYPES OF CARE Kinship Licensing Options



Unlocking Financial Support for Children in WA State



Once a kinship home is determined to be safe, licensing standards should not create unnecessary barriers to financial support.

Placement Type	Kinship Families		Children	
Unlicensed*	395	21%	506	19%
Initial License	205	11%	292	11%
Licensed	1,307	68%	1,818	70%
Grand Total	1,907	100%	2,616	100%

*includes pending applications
**data collection adjusted to filter out ICPCs
As of 4/15/2025

Caregiver Supports Project Phase 1 Foster Care

Maintenance Payments for Licensed Caregivers Only: Current January 2024

Ages	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7
	Basic Maintenance Foster Care	Support Needs: Adolescent Low Needs	Support Needs: Chronic Physical Health	Support Needs: Developmental Disability	Support Needs: Developmental Disability & Chronic Physical Health	Support Needs: Moderate Mental Health Needs	Support Needs: Complex Health
Rates for Caregiver Support Levels Based on Age – Levels 2-7 include Basic							
0 - 5 years	\$722.00	N/A	\$1,407.00	\$1,749.50	\$2,092.00	\$2,434.50	\$2,777.00
6 - 11 years	\$846.00	N/A	\$1,531.00	\$1,873.50	\$2,216.00	\$2,558.50	\$2,901.00
12 years and older	\$860.00 (Initial license only)	\$1,202.50	\$1,545.00	\$1,887.50	\$2,230.00	\$2,572.50	\$2,915.00

Non- Needy TANF Grant	
1 Child	\$450
2 Children	\$570
3 Children	\$706



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Licensed Home

Family of 3 children–
Licensed Foster Home
(level 1 \$722 per child) =
\$2,166

Non-needy TANF

Family of 3 children –
Non-needy TANF Grant
= around
\$706 Total

Caregiver Supports Project (Phase 2)

Behavioral Case Aide Hours Child or Youth are Level 3-7

Placement Support Level	Pre-Authorized Monthly Behavioral Case Aide Hours
1	0
2	0
3	9
4	12
5	15
6	17
7	20

Types of Support for Caregivers

Education advocacy

Health and well-being coordination

Childcare support

Culturally and developmentally appropriate care

Transition to adulthood

Developing specific behavioral strategies

Crisis support

CWP_0074 Kinship Care: Relatives and Suitable Others



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Strengthening Engagement.

Kinship Engagement Unit Pilot
Unlicensed Caregiver Connection Calls
Kinship Engagement Task Force
Kinship Engagement Workshop



Pilot Kinship Engagement Unit

- **What We Set Out to Do**

- Launched a regional pilot from June 2024 through May 2025
- Created dedicated capacity for working with children, youth, and their family networks
- Focused on children and youth with complex placement experiences
- Intended to:
 - Find and engage relatives and trusted adults
 - Build lasting family connections
 - Explore placement and support options
 - Connect caregivers with resources
 - Help families navigate licensing and placement steps
- Our hope was that dedicated staff and time would strengthen family connections and expand placement options.



KINSHIP
ENGAGEMENT UNIT

Centering Youth Voice. Strengthening Family Connections.

What We Learned and How We Regrouped



What Worked

- Dedicated time for direct family engagement
- New connections and some kinship placements
- Support for caregivers navigating resources
- More capacity for persistent outreach



What We Learned

- Engagement needed to begin earlier
- Roles and handoffs needed to be clearer
- Some tasks overlapped with existing units
- Communication and coordination varied
- The original staffing model was not affordable statewide



How We Responded

- Kept direct family engagement at the center
- Used the lessons to strengthen existing kinship work
- Clarified roles and reduced duplication
- Shifted toward a more sustainable, connected approach



Unlicensed Caregiver Connection Calls

Caregivers who opted not to become licensed or were unable to become licensed.

How the Calls Support Caregivers

- Make a personal connection.
- Listen and identify needs.
- Answer questions and identify immediate needs.
- Connect caregivers with financial, community, and peer supports.
- Share follow-up needs with the assigned caseworker.
- Ask about important family and community connections.



Kinship Engagement Task Force

Turning Search into Meaningful Engagement

- Regional staff with experience engaging children, youth, and families
- Focused first on D.S. Settlement children and youth in non-relative placements and now all DS class members
- Contacted relatives and non-related kin about:
 - Placement
 - Ongoing family connections
 - Other ways to support the child or youth
- Built a shared approach across all six regions
- Partnered with caseworkers to explore next steps



Early Results and Lessons Learned

What We Learned

- Engagement often takes several attempts.
- Connection opportunities were more common than placement opportunities.
- Family can contribute in many ways, even when placement is not possible.
- Strong follow-up between task force members and caseworkers is essential.
- Meaningful engagement requires time and dedicated capacity.



Kinship Engagement
Task Force

Kinship Engagement Workshop

Engagement Skills Statewide



In-person training that applied policy and procedure to real-life cases.



Strengthening skills:

- Search
- Engage
- Assess
- Document
- Arriving at Best Interest



Kin-first practice becomes real when staff have the skills, tools, and confidence to carry it forward.





Connecting and Sustaining the System.

Kinship Steering Committee and staff workgroup

Relative Search Unit

Relative Engagement Unit

Creating the merged RSEU



Staff Voice Shaped the Next Path Forward

Create	Create one continuous process
Reduce	Reduce handoffs and duplicate work
Begin	Begin engagement earlier
Improve	Improve communication with relatives and caseworkers
Tailor	Tailor support to the needs of each case



Relative Search Unit

Created between 2010 – 2012.

Completed:

- A full federal relative search to the third-degree within 30 days for children and youth placed in out of home care.
- Sent letters to all identified relatives.
- Informed primary caseworkers of relatives who were interested.



Relative Engagement Unit

Created in Fall 2023 from 3 legislative funded positions.

Purpose: Engage relatives for placement, support, and connection for all children and youth in foster care, including legally free children.

Expanded to those who were at imminent risk of coming into care.

Cases were managed by priority level:

- **Priority 1:** Emergent referrals. The child or youth was without a placement or at risk of being without placement. Abbreviated searches were completed and phone calls made based on worker availability.
- **Priority 2:** Placement disruption. The child or youth had a placement, but the caregivers requested the child or youth be moved on a specific date. Called all relatives on federal relative search list.
- **Priority 3:** Child or youth had placement, but permanency could not be achieved due to relative options needing to be explored. Called all relatives on formal relative search list.



Creating a Relative Search and Engagement Unit



Goal:

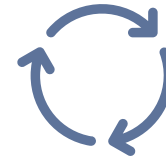
Add capacity for search and engagement while keeping caseworkers at the center of building and maintaining relationships with families.



Staff Recommended:

Blending search and engagement roles

- Removing duplicate steps and streamlining the process
- Tailoring support to the needs of each case instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach



Merge occurred on 6/1/2026

Early Successes of the Merged Team

Relative Search and Engagement Unit



Relative Search & Engagement Unit

FINDING FAMILY. BUILDING CONNECTIONS.

Search and engagement are more streamlined.

Support is tailored to each case and family.

Relatives can be contacted and engaged earlier.

The referral backlog is decreasing.

One worker can follow the relative search and engagement process, reducing duplicate contacts with relatives and caseworkers.

Stronger collaboration with Meeting Program Consultants (meeting facilitator) supports family participation and follow-up in Youth and Family Meetings.



Progress and Next Steps.

Where We Started, Where We Are Now

The Next Phase

What This Means for Children, Youth, and Families





	Initial Placement with Relatives	Children and Youth In Kinship Placement	Exits to Guardianship
2021	37.38%	48.50%	5.83%
2026	47.34%	58.46%	14.31%
Percentage points	Increase 9.96%	Increase 9.96 %	Increase 8.48%

Source: DCYF, OIAA, OIAA Reporting Portal, Entries, Exits and Out of Home Care, Relative v Non-Relative
Data as of: Point In Time: 09/01/2026

Where We Started. Where We Are Now.

Shared commitment. Meaningful progress. Work still ahead.

Lessons Learned Along the Way

Clarity matters

- Similar terms can mean different things
- Clear definitions improve consistency

Breaking Down Silos

- Cross Agency Collaboration
- Shared Responsibility
- Non-duplication of Task

Implementation takes time

- Change requires reinforcement
- Training and coaching remain important

Data requires intention

- Collect only what is meaningful
- Avoid unnecessary burden

Field feedback is essential

- Staff insights improve systems
- Practical experience strengthens implementation

CQI is ongoing

- Improvement is not a one-time event
- Systems must evolve based on learning

The Next Phase



Continue refining:

Procedures
Guidance
Documentation
expectations



Strengthen:

Training
Coaching
Technical assistance



Improve:

Data quality
Outcome measurement
Cross-regional
consistency



Sustain:

Feedback loops
CQI processes
Practice improvements



What this means for Children, Youth, Families, Relatives, and Non-related Kin?

Stronger
engagement

Better
information

More
consistent
practice

Improved
family
connections

Increased
opportunities
for support

Better
decision-
making



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Q & A



Thank you!

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