

The Role of Private Child Welfare Agencies in Kin- Specific Licensing and Supports



As states adopt kin-specific licensing standards, private agencies are asking how this shift may change their role in working with public agencies and kinship families. This resource details multiple ways that jurisdictions have strengthened and deepened their relationships with private child welfare agencies in light of kin-specific licensing, using newly freed-up resources to focus on higher-level supports.

An Overview of Kin-Specific Licensing

For years, federal regulation applied the same licensing standards to both kin and non-kin foster homes, even though the two situations can have key differences. For example, it may be entirely appropriate for a teenager to sleep on their grandmother's couch, while it is not appropriate for a child to sleep in the living room of a home they do not know. Similarly, kin caregivers may need financial assistance, support in navigating complicated family boundaries, and other help rapidly adjusting to unexpected new responsibilities overnight.

Federal law [does not allow](#) federal financial participation in Foster Care Maintenance Payments (FCMPs) to start until a home has fully completed all licensing requirements. Across the country, potential kin caregivers struggled to meet standards that were not designed for their relationships or context, leading to delays or denial of licensure. In many jurisdictions, this meant kin remained unlicensed, and unsupported, for the entire duration of the placement. In others, children were not able to be placed with people who knew and loved them because their kin could not achieve timely licensure.

In September 2023, years of advocacy across the child welfare field, including by private child welfare agencies, led to a new federal rule allowing title IV-E child welfare agencies to adopt kin-specific licensing standards. Working with more than 50 child welfare agencies and 430 people, including kin caregivers themselves, several organizations co-designed a set of [model kin-specific licensing/approval standards](#) built around two required components: a federally compliant background check and a kin caregiver assessment. Longstanding federal law requires that state foster care

standards, including those for kin, must be “reasonably in accord” with national model standards. [42 USC 671\(a\)\(10\)\(A\)](#). Every title IV-E child welfare agency has publicly expressed interest in adopting kin-specific licensing, with about [half already live](#).

With a goal of ensuring that children can grow up with the people who know and love them, and that those kin caregivers receive timely support, the new standards carefully model and enhance existing emergency placement practices. Steps that research found do not impact safety, like upfront income thresholds and rigid environmental standards, were streamlined or removed. Unlike traditional foster home licensing, meant to prepare and assess a home for a wide variety of hypothetical future placements, kin-specific licensing is focused on creating a safe, trauma-informed path for related children. This allows kin caregivers to be licensed and therefore receive FCMPs and other supports as close to day one of placement as possible.

Rather than simply removing non-safety requirements, the model standards argue that certain provisions be converted to supports offered to families, thereby allowing flexibility for kin applicants. For instance, the model standards do not recommend that agencies include training requirements in their kin-specific licensing standards, instead recommending that they offer training once a kin family has already been licensed, ensuring that families receive financial support for the child’s care as soon as possible while they work to improve their skills.

[Federal guidance](#) recommends licensing kin under this new standard within seven days of placement. This truncated timeframe, and the intentional alignment of the kin licensing process to the same emergency placement process that public agencies have already been conducting for some time, means that fewer private agencies are likely to have a role in licensing kin — opening the door to a greater role for these private agencies in supporting kin.

Opportunities for Expanding Private Agency Kinship Supports

"Private agencies in our state have been dwindling, and we've found ourselves wishing they were better positioned to evolve alongside current practice. While specialized foster care remains an important part of the continuum, there is a growing need for recruitment strategies that prioritize kin, along with supports that help stabilize those placements."

— Private Agency Official

The shift to kin-specific licensing can mean more attention, resources, and time available for what really matters: supporting and empowering kin caregivers and the children in their care.

Here are some examples from the field:

Ongoing Case Management and Wraparound Support

Kin caregivers are often handed a placement in the middle of the night and left to navigate a maze of unfamiliar systems on their own. Private agencies are well positioned to provide ongoing support rather than a one-time conversation, helping families understand programs like the Guardianship Assistance Program, providing kin-specific orientation and services, and staying engaged for the duration of a case.

Some private agencies have even extended this relationship into structured post-permanency support, staying connected with families for months after a case closes to help them succeed in their next chapter. For example, Arrow Child & Family Ministries in Texas provides six months of post-permanency support through Texas Child-Centered Care (TC3). Kinship families report that they feel more comfortable reaching out to a private agency with post-permanency concerns or requests for help than they would feel about contacting the state child welfare agency, for fear that asking the state agency could invite too much scrutiny.

One agency leader described her ideal private wraparound offering as including:

- ▶ Regional peer support groups, each co-led by a kin caregiver.
- ▶ Help transporting children to parent visits and other appointments.
- ▶ Trauma-informed parenting support.
- ▶ Help navigating special education and school enrollment.
- ▶ Connections to community and respite resources.

That list is a great starting menu for any agency designing and pitching this work from scratch.

One example to consider following is the Peer Ambassador Program run by Children's Hope Alliance in North Carolina. It connects foster families with experienced foster parent peers who can offer practical guidance, emotional support, and community connection. Peer Ambassadors help new and current foster parents, including kin foster parents, navigate placements; partner with families of origin, the local Department of

Social Services, and other providers; and access support during challenging situations such as placement disruptions, investigations, or when a child leaves the home. The program is designed to strengthen foster families by reducing isolation, increasing confidence, and creating a reliable peer-support network during the most important stages of the fostering experience, and it has very low operating costs.

Kin Finding and Engagement

Nationally, [about 60%](#) of children in foster care are still not placed with kin, in part because finding and engaging relatives takes sustained effort. Even when children are initially placed with kin, ongoing kin finding and true engagement are not only necessary for parallel permanency planning, but critical for every child to thrive and stay connected to their full support network. Private agencies can help to engage and encourage kin who aren't able to provide a home to take on other important roles, from hosting holiday celebrations to providing homework help, respite, and transportation.

In Virginia, the state (which has not yet adopted kin-specific licensing) generally licenses kinship families, but private agencies are involved in the identification and engagement of kin caregivers as well as wraparound kinship support.

Proactive, ongoing family finding and engagement is a natural role for private agencies. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to search for and engage with kin for a defined set of 10 to 20 cases can be a great start towards building this capability.

Therapeutic and Specialized Kinship Homes and Supports

A growing number of kin caregivers are willing and able to take on therapeutic-level care for related children with higher needs. Some states have built additional tiers of specialized kinship homes in response. This is highly skilled work that draws directly on what private agencies already do well: training, clinical support, and intensive case management.

Additionally, as required by the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), if a child is placed in a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP), the program must seek input on the process of determining the most appropriate and least-restrictive environment for the child from a family and permanency team, which must include a child's original family members, kin and other emotionally significant individuals, and other relevant professionals. FFPSA also requires that the program provide six months of family-based post-discharge services. With support and training from private agencies, kin can serve as a discharge resource for children who no longer need a higher level of care.

FFTA, a national nonprofit membership organization, was awarded two three-year grants, totaling over \$2 million, from The Duke Endowment to develop and implement therapeutic foster care within kinship homes. Building upon several Kinship Summits that FFTA held in states around the country from 2015 to 2018, FFTA launched the Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care (KTFC) pilot project in 2020.

Through the pilot, which covered three North Carolina counties, public agencies identified youth with child welfare involvement, and then private agencies trained and supervised kin caregivers utilizing therapeutic standards. The public and private agencies shared responsibility for kin search, engagement, and licensure. The evaluation found that it cost roughly \$175 a day per youth, compared to \$268 a day for a Level 3 group home and \$500 a day for a psychiatric residential treatment facility. It also found gains in sibling placement and family connection and reduced re-entry to care.

Following the completion of the KTFC pilot in 2025, more private agencies have become interested in this intervention to support kin caregivers of children with higher needs. Rapid Resource for Families, a North Carolina-led agency, began providing an additional level of support for kin with their Intensive Alternative Family Treatment (IAFT) program, which aims to support children with higher levels of behavioral health needs by delivering even more training, support, and supervision than KTFC.

Through its Voluntary Care Management (VCM) program, Connecticut has a contract with the Carelon Behavioral Health agency to serve youth with serious emotional or behavioral health challenges, allowing families to access support without having to go through the public child welfare agency. Connecticut also has Urgent Crisis Centers around the state for families who are experiencing a behavioral health crisis but do not require an emergency-department level of care. The centers serve as walk-in clinics providing youth and their families with immediate access to resources while they are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-injury, feelings of depression or anxiety, and/or out-of-control behaviors. Both services are examples of where private agencies can serve children and families outside a formal child welfare relationship.

Supporting Kin-to-Non-Kin Conversion

Some private agencies have expressed concerns that kin foster homes rarely go on to take more placements, so investing in them is not always as fruitful as investing in a traditional home. However, a supported kin caregiver who has had a positive experience can make a great candidate for becoming a traditional foster parent. Some agencies have made this transition a deliberate, supported process rather than an

occasional happy accident, and report conversion rates as high as 30% to 40% as a result.

The strongest models frame private agency involvement as additive rather than duplicative. A public agency may be able to complete kin-specific licensing steps in days, but that leaves open the much bigger question of who provides intensive, ongoing case management.

Further, not every family is comfortable working directly with the government. Private agencies that lead with support, options, and advocacy for families navigating a system with many moving parts are the ones that public agencies will want to keep close as kin-first practices evolve and expand.

Collaboration Models for Public-Private Partnership in Supporting Kin

“It is not sustainable for a state to reduce or eliminate private provider capacity, only to have to rebuild those partnerships when placement needs increase. That kind of reactive approach can drive up costs and create unnecessary disruption for children and families. Public and private agencies may play different roles, but we have to work in true partnership if we are going to build a system that can respond to changing needs and, ultimately, help children and families achieve permanency and long-term success.”

— Treva Johnson, Director of Public Policy and State Partnerships, FFTA

The agencies furthest ahead on this shift are the ones asking how the whole system can be greater than the sum of its parts and building the case management, wraparound support, and specialized care that make kin placements succeed long after the licensing paperwork is done. These agencies likely know the child better than an outside worker who is not working with the family on an ongoing basis, and they can also effectively respond if the child’s placement needs change.

States and counties are structuring this work in a range of ways, including:

- ▶ **A public agency makes the emergency placement, then passes some or all kin cases to private agencies to complete licensing and provide ongoing case management.** Iowa amended its existing Recruitment, Retention, Training and Support (RRTS) contract to allow contractors to help kin complete the state’s

new kin-specific approval process. Critically, Iowa included their private agency partners, as well as their Kinship Navigator Services, in the design and implementation workgroups for the new kin standards, the kinship home study process, documentation and communication protocols, and staff and kin caregiver training requirements.

- ▶ **A public agency makes the emergency placement and licenses kin directly, but contracts out high-need or therapeutic-level kin cases to private agencies.** In Tennessee, a kin caregiver can be licensed as a therapeutic home through a private provider when the case requires it.
- ▶ **Public and private agencies manage the case collaboratively.** This is the standing model in Nevada, where public agencies alone approve kin but private providers are building case management and family-finding services alongside them. In Texas, public agencies identify and place youth in kinship families and then work collaboratively to connect kinship families with local, private Child Placing Agencies for licensure.

The right structure depends on a state's existing capacity, workforce, and relationships, and the strength and adaptability of its private agency network.

When FFTA evaluated its own public/private kinship partnership, it identified opportunities for improved collaboration between private and public agencies, including gaps in agency capacity, mismatched organizational cultures, weak communication between partners, uneven leadership commitment, thin staff capacity, and unclear role definition. Every one of those has a concrete fix: referral pathways to close capacity gaps, joint training to build shared culture, regular structured meetings between partners, senior leadership forums to resolve friction, dedicated kinship-focused staff, and explicit role documentation reviewed at every level of worker. None of these fixes requires new legislation, but they do require both agencies to decide to build the relationship.

Change can be uncomfortable, and it takes time and clear communication. Just as an agency solely focused on kin would need time to adjust to recruiting and supporting traditional foster homes, the shift to a kin-first culture can also be an adjustment for many private agencies — but ultimately a great one. Success is often dependent on effective design and supports showcasing the valuable and critical partnership between private agencies, public agencies, families, and children.

There is real and growing work for private agencies beyond licensing. Kin-specific licensing is not the end of the private agency's role in supporting kin. It's the beginning of a stronger one.

Additional Resources

- ▶ Federal guidance recommending a seven-day licensing timeframe for kin: [ACF Information Memorandum IM-26-02](#)
- ▶ National kin-specific licensing progress map: [Grandfamilies.org progress map](#)
- ▶ Request technical assistance: [Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network form](#)
- ▶ Compare your jurisdiction's approval process to the model standards: [Kin-Specific Standards Crosswalk](#)
- ▶ Child Welfare Playbook research summary on therapeutic foster care: [Therapeutic Foster Care](#) & [Treatment Foster Care: Designing Systems and Developing Families](#)
- ▶ Evaluated model and toolkit for a therapeutic kinship partnership: [FFTA Kinship Treatment Foster Care Initiative Toolkit](#)
- ▶ Practical checklist for building a collaborative public/private partnership: FFTA, "Importance of Collaboration in Public/Private Agency Partnerships: Lessons from Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care" (May 2023) — available on request from FFTA
- ▶ National kinship data: [Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network Kinship Data](#)

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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