Bridging Systems for Kinship Families

Guide for Replication



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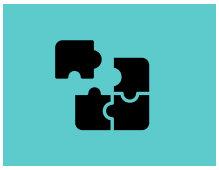
Introduction

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) was created to measurably increase the capacity and effectiveness of states, territories, Tribes/Tribal organizations, and community-based organizations to serve and support kinship/grandfamilies. In pursuit of this goal, the Network provided in-depth, holistic technical assistance (TA) to three jurisdictions: a county in a state where counties administer social services, a state that administers social services statewide, and a Tribal Nation. The Network called this initiative Bridging Systems for Kinship Families (Bridging Systems).

Bridging Systems aimed to build high-impact, cross-system partnerships that make systems more effective and responsive for kinship/grandfamilies, and to develop replicable models and strategies that can inform services and systems nationally. Sub-objectives included helping sites:



Optimize their kinship navigator program, National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) supports, and child welfare system services for maximum effectiveness.



Integrate innovative/emerging, evidence-based/informed practices.



Amplify the voices of those with lived experience to shape programs, services, and systems.

This guide is for communities seeking to replicate Bridging Systems. It includes examples from the three Bridging Systems sites and other resources to support implementation.

GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Be Clear About Purpose

Bridging Systems rests on a simple premise: kin caregivers are best served when the systems that support them collaborate to deliver seamless, efficient, and effective services. As you begin, make sure all partners understand and commit to this purpose.

Identify lead partners

The Network has identified eight key systems that support kinship families. These systems support the caregivers, the children they raise, and the children's parents.



For your jurisdiction's Bridging Systems work, identify a lead government agency and at least two lead partners based on these general, national parameters. One lead partner should be another government agency; the other should be a community-based nonprofit with jurisdiction-wide reach. You may also add partners important to your community. For example, you may include the Department of Corrections (DOC), since incarcerated mothers often turn to kin to care for their children. The DOC can support mothers and caregivers through visitation policies, reentry support, and other operating procedures.

Conduct an exploratory meeting

Schedule an exploratory meeting with your potential lead partners. Discuss:

- Who will be the lead government agency in this effort? Which system does the lead agency represent? Which other government agency will serve as one of the other lead partners? Typically, child welfare and aging are the most significant systems for kinship families.

- Which community-based organization should also be a lead partner? Does that organization run the jurisdiction's kinship navigator program?
- Who can we include for their lived expertise? Are there at least two kin caregivers, young adults raised in kinship families, and/or parents of children in kinship care who will participate? How will we compensate them for their time?
- What is the history of cross-system collaboration in our jurisdiction? Is there an existing group or council we can leverage for this work? How will we overcome any barriers experienced in the past?
- Who can serve as our project champion?
- What other agencies and organizations should we invite to the launch meeting?

Include and compensate lived experts as partners

Include at least two people with kinship care experience—kin caregivers, parents, or young people raised by kin—in your Bridging Systems work group. Include one lived expert with child welfare involvement and one without (formal and informal kinship care experience). These experts should attend the launch meeting and help shape the work as it develops. Compensate them for their time.



Resource: Tips to Include Kinship / Grandfamilies in Programmatic Decision-Making

Identify a project champion

A project champion is essential to success and serves as the team's main contact and reference point. The champion can be one person or, if no one person can commit the time, several people who share duties. The champion can be a partner agency staff member or a consultant. Look for someone who knows the community well, has planning and project management experience, and, ideally, has worked with many of the partners. Expertise in kinship or a particular system is a plus.

The champion's duties may include:

- Setting agendas for regular meetings in consultation with partners, creating PowerPoint presentations, and providing logistical help.
- Facilitating meetings or taking notes, depending on skills.

- Working with partners on follow-up after each meeting and moving the action plan forward.
- Managing the project in project management software, if available.

Resource: Implementation Champions as a Strategy to Build Capacity

Examples from Bridging Systems sites:



In **Idaho**, the Network hired a part-time consultant who already worked part-time for a partner agency. She had the interest and availability to facilitate meetings and track progress toward the goals in the site's action plan.



At the **Oneida Nation of Wisconsin**, the staff member most connected to serving kinship families led the team.



In **San Diego**, the Network hired a part-time consultant who had previously worked for the County and whom the team knew and trusted.

While the Network paid for consultants at two sites, a staff member who is committed to the project and supported by leadership can fill the same role.

Identify additional partner agencies/organizations

Using the list of agencies and organizations from the exploratory meeting, reach out to additional potential partners. Describe what you hope to accomplish and how they can contribute, so they can decide whether they are ready to participate. Not every agency or organization you identify needs to participate consistently in the work group. Some may take a more limited role, helping inform or promote your work as needed.

The Bridging Systems sites included both types: ongoing partners and others with a more limited role. Each site had representation from the eight priority systems the Network identified, as shown in the graphic.

Systems Represented on Bridging Systems Implementation Teams

System	Idaho	San Diego	Oneida Nation
Aging	7	3	1
Child Welfare	7	4	2
Disability	7	3	1
Education	6	3	1
Housing	5	2	1
Health	3	4	-
Nutrition	4	3	-
TANF	3	2	1
Tribal	4	-	*
Legal	4	2	1
Other	4	-	-
Total Team Participants	**54**	**26**	**8**

* Oneida Nation includes Tribal only

Resource: Identifying and Engaging Untapped Partners to Support Kinship/Grandfamilies

GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Lay the Groundwork

While the purpose of this work is to bridge systems for kinship families, your jurisdiction sets its own goals and plan based on the needs and strengths of its kinship families.

Conduct the launch meeting

To create your goals and preliminary action plan, we strongly recommend launching the project with an intensive in-person meeting. Ideally, it spans two partial days (about ten hours of working time) and brings together the initial partners, including those with lived kinship experience. In-person time builds relationships and commitment to the project. You can also plan virtually, using tools such as Zoom breakout rooms—a useful option for geographically large jurisdictions where travel is difficult. If you meet virtually, limit online sessions to four hours a day with two short breaks.

Agenda for a day-and-a-half launch meeting:

1 **Day one (four hours with a break):**
Define the challenges to solve and create a theory of change

2 **Day two (six hours with lunch):**
Develop three to four goals, draft a preliminary action plan, and identify additional potential partners

→ **Action step:**
Review and provide feedback on the draft goals and action plan

Resource: Bridging Systems PowerPoint Template

Resource: Bridging Systems Workbook

Complete pre-meeting work

Before the launch meeting at each Bridging Systems site, we asked participants to talk with a kin caregiver they serve or, if they are kin caregivers themselves, with a fellow caregiver. We asked them to discuss the following and bring their notes to the meeting:

- What are the kin caregiver's experiences receiving kinship services?
- What services supported them? What was most helpful?
- What were their challenges? What do they wish existed to make their caregiving journey easier?

These conversations informed the shared vision and theory of change work on day one. The Bridging Systems PowerPoint template linked above includes this activity.

Take time for introductions

Open the meeting with brief introductions. The Bridging Systems sites used icebreaker questions to draw out partner qualities: If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be? What qualities would you bring to this collaboration?

Define the challenges to solve

Each jurisdiction has its own strengths and challenges in serving kinship families. Partners should work together to define those challenges. From that brainstorm, participants develop a shared vision for the work.



Shared vision from the San Diego County Bridging Systems site: Kinship families are provided information and guidance toward equitable support early and throughout their caregiving journey. This results in empowered, connected, and thriving kinship families who have a sense of belonging in the community.

Create your theory of change

Your shared vision informs your theory of change, which explains how the collaborative process works and why its activities should lead to the desired outcomes. It maps the conditions, resources, and interventions needed to reach those outcomes. It also identifies the root causes of a problem, why it occurs, and how to create positive

change. The workbook and PowerPoint slides linked above include activities and templates to develop your theory of change.

Resource: Prendergast, S., & Malm, K. (2022). How to Develop a Theory of Change and Logic Model for Your Kinship Navigator Program

Develop your goals

On day two, build on your theory of change by developing three to four shared SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. These goals form the basis of your action plan.

Resource: University of California (2017). SMART Goals: A How to Guide

Self-directed goals from Bridging Systems sites:

IDAHO:

Map Assets: To inform the overall project, conduct statewide asset mapping of resources available to kinship families and identify how the available resources can interconnect and be leveraged to better support the families.

Engage Community: To build community support for kinship families, design a multifaceted communication strategy to (1) engage agencies that serve kinship families, (2) expand agencies' awareness of other agencies' supports and the strengths and needs of the families, and (3) inform kinship families and the broader community of these available services.

Streamline Supports: To facilitate access to services and streamline supports for kinship families, leverage and coordinate community assets and community engagement.

ONEIDA NATION OF WISCONSIN:



Strengthen Capacity: Increase staff and organizational resources to best serve relative caregivers through culture, technology, and collaboration.



Engage Caregivers: Increase cultural engagement, rapport with staff, and resource sharing for relative caregiving families.



Improve Service Delivery: Increase the quality of engagement between relative caregivers and service providers by the end of 2026 and beyond.



Sustain Resources: Diversify funding sources of the Bridging Systems partners to maximize services for relative caregivers in the next 18 months for long-term sustainability.

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA:



Single-Point Support: To support kin caregivers early and throughout their caregiving journey, coordinate and streamline existing community website information and designate and enhance a mobile-friendly website hub.



Peer Mentors: To enhance support for new kin caregivers as they enter the YMCA's Kinship Navigator Program, create a pilot peer mentorship program.



Community Education: To enhance community engagement and support for kinship families, conduct a broad public awareness and education campaign.



Continuity: To ensure continuity of Bridging Systems for Kinship Families, develop a three-year plan to begin at the conclusion of this project and convert this project's work group into an ongoing Kinship Task Force.

Draft a preliminary action plan

An action plan concisely lays out what you want to achieve, based on your SMART goals and theory of change. The action plan should list your three to four SMART goals, the steps to achieve them, the agencies and staff responsible, and realistic start and completion dates.

Asset mapping often comes before action planning. At the Bridging Systems sites, however, action planning revealed gaps in partners' knowledge of local kinship resources, which highlighted the need for an asset map. Your draft action plan will evolve as you map assets, identify gaps in services and supports, and learn what kin caregivers in your community need.



Resource: Action Plan template

Map current assets

Identify what is already available to serve kin caregivers in your community, where services overlap, and where gaps exist. Partners can share information about their own programs and others they know about, and gather input from as many providers across systems serving kin caregivers as possible.

After the launch meetings, the Bridging Systems sites invited agencies to present their kinship services at monthly meetings. These presentations helped flesh out the asset map and showed which services to enhance, expand, or coordinate, and which to develop.



Resource: Assessing Community Needs



Resource: Asset Map template (download)

Gather feedback from community members

After the launch meeting, gather feedback from additional lived experts—kin caregivers, parents, and young people with kinship care experience—as well as agency leaders and staff. Use surveys, discussions, or both. Group discussions are an efficient way to gather rich, nuanced information, and you can hold them during existing meetings, such as staff meetings or kin caregiver support groups. Before you begin, be clear about the purpose.

Purposes of gathering this feedback include:

- Engaging community members in the development of the action plan.
- Gathering feedback on how to prioritize goals.
- Gathering community input to inform and refine strategies and approaches.
- Setting the stage for future community member engagement.
- Ensuring that the Bridging Systems work is responsive to the community you seek to serve.

Compensate caregivers and other lived experts for their time and expertise. The Bridging Systems sites gave each focus group participant a $50 gift card.

Training Focus Group Facilitators:

The Bridging Systems sites held focus groups at existing caregiver support groups to gather community feedback. Beforehand, the Network TA team trained partner staff to facilitate them:

Training agenda:

1. Purpose of the group discussions
2. Preparing to conduct the group discussions
3. Strategies for group discussion facilitators
4. Tips for notetakers
5. After the group discussion
6. Group discussion question development

Resource: Community Engagement Presentation

Sample focus group questions:

The first three questions were repeated for each goal in the action plan.

- Thinking about Goal 1, how will this be important to you and your family?
  - In what ways?
  - How about to other caregivers you know?
- How do you think the County can meet Goal 1?
  - Probe what actions they think the County/community organizations can take.
  - Probe their interests and experience with existing services.
- What do you want the end result of Goal 1 to be?
  - What would it take for you to think, "Wow, the County is really helping kin caregivers"?
  - How would it make caregivers' lives better?
- Is there something missing from the goals in the action plan that you would like to add?



GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Put Your Plan into Action

You have gathered your team, created a preliminary action plan, and refined it with input from a broader group of staff, families, and community providers. Now it is time to act. Focus your monthly and in-person meetings on completing your community's kinship asset map, adding specific steps to the action plan, carrying out those steps together, and deciding what data you need to track outcomes.

Select a regular schedule for meetings

A set meeting schedule lets team members block off time well in advance. Meetings can be virtual, in person, or a mix. Alternating formats offers the convenience of virtual meetings, especially for geographically dispersed teams, while preserving in-person time to build relationships in ways that are hard to do online.

The Bridging Systems sites followed this meeting schedule:

1. **Monthly virtual planning meetings** between the site consultant/project lead and the Network team.
2. **Monthly 90-minute virtual working meetings** with the full work group.
3. **Twice-yearly, day-and-a-half in-person meetings** at the lead agency's site.

Set a timeline for accomplishments

Build the timeline into your action plan and review it at each full team meeting to keep members on track and motivated. See the action plan template linked above.

Keep your advisors informed

As you take action, such as creating new webpages or caregiver roadmaps, report back to the people who gave you input. At the Bridging Systems sites, we returned to the caregiver support groups to share our collective progress and the materials they had recommended.

Educate your community about kinship care

Whatever goals you set, raising awareness about kinship families will be a key strategy. The public, decision-makers, and policymakers should understand how common kinship care is and why services should be tailored and promoted to kinship families across the community.

Resource: We know grandfamilies are out there. How do we find them?

Resource: Toolkit to Raise Awareness and Celebrate Kinship Families

Examples from Bridging Systems sites:



San Diego created a Promotion Campaign Toolkit based on the Network toolkit, including a "Script for Talking with Professionals and the Broader Community" about kinship care.



San Diego offered presentations on kinship families' needs and available services to interested groups.



With Network support, **Idaho** adapted our two-minute awareness-raising video and cut it into 15-second spots for Idaho Public Television. Idaho also wrapped six public buses with messages supporting those who step in to care for children whose parents cannot.

GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Consider Data Needs

Plan to collect data that shows whether and when you meet your goals and how your initiative improves the lives of kinship families in your jurisdiction. Key questions to consider:

What data is already available and how can it be used to track outcomes?

Available data can include child-level state administrative data, such as data from the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) or a comparable system. It can also include family-level data collected by provider agencies, Area Agency on Aging service provision data, and data from other community provider systems that can help you track changes in outcomes over time for kinship families.

What data is missing and needed?

Existing data may not give you a full picture of how kinship families are faring or whether outcomes improve over time. For example, you may want to know if kin caregivers experience less stress and feel more supported after the implementation of a kinship navigator program. To assess improvements for kin caregivers, you could add a survey such as the "Perceived Stress Scale" at service entry and exit.

Resource:
To access data on the number of children being raised by kin caregivers, and basic demographic information on grandparent caregivers in your community, see this Network resource on Kinship/Grandfamilies Data.

What plans are needed to collect additional data?

Consider how to collect the data, who is best positioned to collect it, and when to collect it for maximum usefulness. You may need to train service providers to administer surveys.

How will the data be analyzed and outcomes reported?

Your approach to analysis and reporting may depend on staff capacity and skills. Some survey instruments, such as the "Protective Factors Survey," include online data collection portals and built-in reports any staff member can use to show how families are faring.

The data you use to show the quality of your work should align with your theory of change, which describes why your activities should lead to the desired outcomes. Your data should demonstrate those expected changes. For example, you might track improvements in perceived stress to show positive impacts on kin caregiver well-being.

Who are the audiences for the data (funders, local/state/federal government, families)?

Different audiences care about different aspects of your data, and knowing your audience helps shape your message. For example, funders may want to know whether you are delivering the service as intended (fidelity) and whether the outcomes justify the cost (return on investment). Families may want to know how other families benefited and what they can expect.



GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Sustain the Gains

Start planning for sustainability as early as the exploratory meeting. In addition to using the checklist linked below, consider these steps throughout your Bridging Systems work:

- [ ] Publish annual reports and present your Bridging Systems achievements at conferences and special events, such as a Kinship Care Month celebration.
- [ ] Highlight personal testimonials.
- [ ] Report regularly on accomplishments to decision-makers and policymakers.
- [ ] Routinely reassess kinship families' needs and your community assets, since both change over time.



Resource: Bridging Systems for Kinship Families Sustainability Checklist

GUIDELINES FOR REPLICATION

Reach Out to the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network

The Network offers free, on-demand assistance to help you scale and replicate the three cross-system models we developed. If you have questions about cross-system work or kinship-specific supports and services, reach out through our assistance form.

Learn more about the Bridging Systems sites and the resources they developed in the Spotlights on Idaho, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, and the County of San Diego, California, at www.GKSNetwork.org.

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.

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