Bridging Systems for Kinship Families

Two years of cross-system collaboration for — and with — kinship families

Spotlight on Idaho

generations united

GRANDFAMILIES & KINSHIP SUPPORT NETWORK
A National Technical Assistance Center

Opportunity

From 2024 to 2026, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) provided intensive assistance to a state, a county, and a Tribe to work across their government systems and community-based agencies to create replicable models of successful collaboration — all on behalf of, and alongside, kinship families.

The Network designed "Bridging Systems for Kinship Families" in response to a common challenge: services for kinship families often operate in silos, which limits their ability to support families effectively. We assisted Idaho, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, and the County of San Diego, California, in working together across their systems to leverage, streamline, and maximize community assets for all kinship families, whether involved in the child welfare system or not. We set out to create three models of cross-system work that other jurisdictions could learn from and replicate.

Access this PDF & Bridging Systems Replication Toolkit:

We are pleased to share this spotlight on Idaho's cross-system work. Together with lessons learned from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin and San Diego County, we developed an accompanying Replication Toolkit so other jurisdictions can also Bridge Systems for Kinship Families and better support kinship families in their communities.

Competitive Application Process

With support from partner Child Trends, the Network created a competitive application process for this ongoing intensive assistance. The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), another Network partner, culturally adapted the application process for Tribes.

The Network chose Idaho for its strong application and commitment to this intensive work. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW) led the application, with the Idaho Department of Correction (IDOC) and the Idaho Caregiver Alliance (ICA) as co-applicants. During their virtual interview, all three applicants described the unique landscape in Idaho: a state with both urban and rural areas and five federally recognized Native American Tribes. The state was ready for this opportunity because it already had strong partnerships in place and saw multiple ways to leverage them to better support kin.

IDOC's role as a co-applicant was especially significant because Idaho has the highest rate of incarcerated women per capita in the United States. In 2025, 84% of women in jail and 81% of women in state prisons were mothers, and 67% of these women reported living with their child/children at the time of their arrest. When mothers are incarcerated, they often turn to kin to care for their children.

Team Members

In addition to the Network team and the three lead organizations, approximately 15 staff from both government and community-based agencies, one kin caregiver, and one parent whose children are in kinship care worked together to "Bridge Systems" and improve supports for kinship families across the state. Participants represented aging, housing, legal, education, TANF, child welfare, and multiple community-based systems.



JUNE 2024

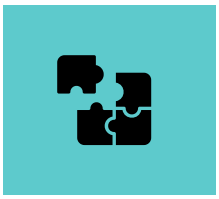
Launch Meeting

Team Member Responsibilities

As part of the application process, the Network required the following commitments from work group members:



Co-develop and implement an action plan to collaborate across agencies and organizations, all to support kinship families both inside and outside the child welfare system.



Invest time and effort over the course of the two-year project, including active participation in monthly 90-minute virtual meetings and twice-yearly in-person meetings totaling 10 hours each.



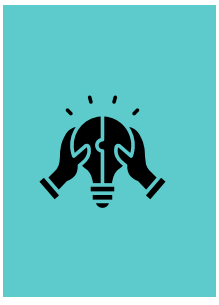
Participate in an assessment of the project, including annual interviews with our evaluators at Child Trends.

Network Support

The Network's team, which included partner Child Trends, supported Idaho in the following ways:



Provided technical assistance to the work group, including guidance on kinship services and supports, funding sources, and measurement of program outcomes. We trained Idaho's kinship navigators and tailored existing training templates with Idaho-specific information. We also brought in an expert from the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law to discuss the legal needs of kin.



Supported strategic planning and facilitated and coordinated the work. In addition to Network staff support, the Network contracted with a part-time on-the-ground consultant who knew Idaho and its services. That trusted presence helped keep the work on course.

Compensated and supported the lived experience experts on the work group.

Oversaw the creation of all project tools and resources, including their editing, design, and translation.

Process Overview

The Idaho Bridging Systems work began in April 2024 with a virtual kickoff meeting and concluded in September 2026. Over the course of the two years, the team met five times in person and 20 times virtually, completing action steps between meetings.

In June 2024, the true work of the project began during two days of in-person meetings. With expert facilitation from the Network, the group developed a shared vision, a theory of change, goals, and the start of a draft action plan.

Shared Vision Co-Developed by the Idaho Team

JUNE 2024

Idaho leading the way with an innovative streamlined experience that strengthens connectedness, is responsive and proactive, increases awareness/recognition of who kinship caregivers are, provides holistic supports for families including caregivers, children & parents, and shifts narratives.



Goals and Accomplishments

Based on themes that emerged from the two-day meeting, the team collectively developed three main goals. Below each goal is a summary of the group's accomplishments.



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.

The Bridging Systems team developed this goal after recognizing that its cross-system work would be most effective with a comprehensive list of who was working with kin across the state. To complete this goal, Child Trends trained four team members to conduct focus groups at existing support groups hosted by local Area Agencies on Aging, a Tribe, and a facility within the Idaho Department of Correction. During those groups, the facilitators asked specific questions about the draft goals, a draft "rack card" for caregivers, and the project's overall approach. Simultaneously, each Bridging Systems organization gave short presentations to the work group about specific services offered within their organization, all of which informed a thorough asset map. Additionally, the work group identified missing systems or other prominent community organizations that serve kin and included them in the asset map.

Network staff used the asset map to update the Idaho GrandFacts Fact Sheet, ensuring that caregivers across the state receive relevant, up-to-date information.



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.

Once the group had identified and organized statewide services, it set out to develop comprehensive resources for community partners and kin caregivers. Notably, the group developed a comprehensive promotional toolkit and shared it with state partners. It includes several resources created or edited by the group throughout the two years, including an educational flyer to build community awareness and a two-minute video,

adapted from the Network's national kinship video, to raise awareness about Idaho's kinship families. The toolkit also includes an Idaho 211 CareLine flyer or "rack card" that explains kinship care and how to access resources. Community partners can distribute this flyer. IDOC distributes it throughout visitor centers in its facilities so that probation officers, case managers, and kin caregivers visiting an IDOC facility know what resources are available.

Network staff were thrilled to help IDHW edit our two-minute kinship video into 15-second spots that aired on Idaho Public Television, and to see IDHW invest in six public bus wraps. Those wraps, one of which is shown below, serve as mobile billboards to help raise awareness about kinship care and show kin caregivers where to go for assistance.



The group also pursued other work under this goal, which individual organizations have committed to continue. The group explored implementing a peer mentorship program for kinship families who are not connected to the child welfare system. A local nonprofit already does similar work, and the group looked into possible funding opportunities and connections to new partners. IDOC is also pursuing the possibility of piloting parenting classes in Community Reentry Centers with an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of kinship care and reunification with parents and children.

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

The team advanced this goal by coordinating a single point of entry for kin caregivers. The group decided that Idaho's 211 CareLine website would serve as the central "hub" for kinship resources because it has a trusted history with kin caregivers across the state. The group reviewed the website to identify gaps or areas where information was

outdated. Using the asset map, the team added new resources for caregivers visiting the 211 website. Within IDHW, the 211 CareLine trained all of its agents on kinship care, helping them identify callers who may not recognize themselves as kin caregivers. Two agents designated as kinship experts received intensive, ongoing training. As part of this process, IDHW implemented an online kinship form on 211 where caregivers can self-initiate areas of interest. The form speeds up response times — caregivers often get a call back from a 211 agent within a couple of hours of submitting it.

Under this goal, the group co-created a caregiver roadmap and translated it into Spanish. This two-page resource for kinship caregivers provides step-by-step guidance for a kin caregiver starting the caregiving journey, and includes resources on establishing caregiver status, addressing basic needs, securing support, and considering permanent legal options.

Impact

> “Bridging Systems brought organizations across the state together to create new resources, connections, and awareness for Idaho kinship families. As a result, Idaho is creating the first kinship state plan in the nation. The momentum and collaboration that the Bridging Systems project established made this possible. I am proud to have been a part of this amazing work that is making real impacts for Idaho kinship families.”
>
> **— Edwina French, Bridging Systems for Kinship Families Consultant**

The collaboration and outreach efforts of Bridging Systems for Kinship Families helped increase awareness of and engagement with kinship services across Idaho. One measure of this impact was the number of visits to Idaho’s 211 CareLine website, particularly the kinship and caregiving page. Outreach resources developed through the project, including the rack card and roadmap, directed caregivers to this webpage to learn about available resources and services. During the first six months of 2024, before the project began, the page received 1,148 views. During the first six months of 2026, the page received 1,722 views, a 50% increase.

Since IDHW introduced the kinship-specific form on the 211 website in April 2025, a total of 172 kinship caregivers have requested information through the portal, and 232 kinship caregivers have received assistance from one of Idaho’s specially trained kinship agents.

Sustainability

Idaho's Bridging Systems goals laid the groundwork and built momentum for the Idaho Caregiver Alliance (ICA) to lead the development of the nation's first comprehensive statewide kinship plan. Following the passage of Idaho Senate Resolution 118 in spring 2026, ICA convened a committee of stakeholders, including two Network staff members and lived experts, to draft the state plan. The plan will provide a comprehensive blueprint to ensure state and community-based organizations that support kin caregivers can maximize their services. ICA will present the plan to policymakers in the 2027 legislative session, and stakeholders will use it to prioritize and coordinate efforts.

> "While this was a two-year project, the benefits are going to continue for many, many years to come. With Idaho having the first kinship state plan, through [the Network's] support, we have the opportunity to be trailblazers. And that's so exciting."
>
> **— Jen Haddad, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare**

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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:

GKSNetwork.org

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