Bridging Systems for Kinship Families

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

Spotlight on the County of San Diego

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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 the common challenge that services for kinship families are in silos that limit their ability to effectively support the families. 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. Our expectation was 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 very pleased to share this spotlight of the cross-system work successfully accomplished by the County of San Diego. Together with lessons learned from Idaho and the Oneida Nation, 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 the County of San Diego as the county we would support, based on the review team's consensus that the applicants were ready, able, and committed to do this intensive work. While the application required a government agency lead applicant and two co-applicant agencies, San Diego exceeded our requirements with four strong lead agencies representing three government agencies and a countywide community-based organization. Each of the four agencies and two kinship caregiver experts — one raising a child through the child welfare system and the other with no child welfare involvement — submitted a strong application and then participated in a virtual group interview. Each spoke passionately about their commitment to kinship families and their readiness for the assistance. They emphasized that although great work was happening for kinship families in the county, the work was not part of a shared strategy. Consequently, neither the agencies nor the families were aware of, or connected to, all the available services that could help.

The applicants also effectively articulated during the interview that San Diego County is a microcosm of the United States, with urban and rural areas, Tribes, a strong military community, immigrants from around the world speaking at least nine primary languages, and individuals representing every socioeconomic level. Those factors made it ripe for a county replication model that could work in an array of communities.

Team Members

In addition to the Network team, approximately 15 staff from the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency departments (covering aging, child welfare, and strategy and community engagement) and community-based organizations, including the YMCA San Diego and SAY San Diego's Project Keep, along with two kinship caregivers, worked together to "Bridge Systems" and improve supports for kinship families in the county.

Throughout the project, the group's composition stayed remarkably intact with consistent participation from the core group and others, such as staff from 211 and the San Diego County Office of Education, participating as needed.



MAY 2024

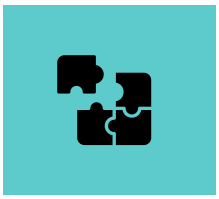
Launch Meeting

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 County 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 ten hours each.



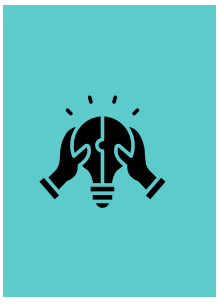
Participate in an assessment of the project, including annual interviews with our evaluators at Child Trends.

Network Support

The Network's team, which included partner Child Trends, supported the County of San Diego in the following ways:



Provided technical assistance, including guidance on kinship services and supports, funding sources, effective messaging, and measurement of program outcomes. We also brought in other experts from the University of Kentucky School of Social Work to discuss their kinship peer mentor program, and from the Massachusetts Commission on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren to inform the group's continuity planning.



Supported strategic planning and facilitated and coordinated the work. In addition to Network staff support, the Network hired a part-time on-the-ground consultant who knew the County 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 San Diego Bridging Systems work began in April 2024 with a virtual introductory meeting and concluded in September 2026 with a Kinship Care Month celebration event. Over the course of the two years, the team met six times in person and 20 times virtually, with action steps accomplished between each meeting.

In May 2024, the true work of the project began during two days of in-person meetings. Through Network-provided expert facilitation, 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 San Diego County Team

MAY 2024

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.



After that meeting, to obtain feedback and buy-in from a broader array of kinship caregivers, Child Trends staff trained County staff to attend existing caregiver support group meetings and conduct four focus groups. During those groups, the facilitators asked specific questions about the draft goals, a draft kinship caregiver "Road Map," and the project's overall approach.

From these findings, the group prioritized the designation and creation of an easy-to-navigate website hub, along with a community-wide awareness campaign.

Simultaneously with the initial set of focus groups, the team worked together to identify other agencies and groups supporting kinship families and invited them to give short presentations to the full team, all of which informed a thorough asset map and the collective action plan.

5 Categories of Need Emerged

Forty-five kinship caregivers participated in four focus groups throughout San Diego (South, Central, East, and North).

1. A centralized system with access to resources and peer support
2. Community awareness
3. Continued support for current programs
4. Increased school collaboration
5. Additional mental health and disability support

Throughout the two years, team members further refined and acted on the plan. The focus group facilitators returned to the support groups to inform the kinship caregivers about our collective progress and to share the two-page "Road Map" the group developed for kinship caregivers.

Goals and Accomplishments

The team collectively developed four main goals, with input from the kinship caregiver focus groups we conducted across the county. Below each goal is a summary of the group's accomplishments.



Central Hub: To support kinship caregivers early and throughout their caregiving journey, coordinate and streamline existing community website information and designate and enhance a mobile-friendly website hub.

Together, we began working on this goal by reviewing the multiple county websites for kinship families, some of which were outdated or had conflicting information. As a group, we worked with 211 to streamline and update its kinship program database and agreed on which website to elevate as the "hub."

We chose the County's *Live Well* San Diego site because it has a neutral URL that does not identify it as a government website and has a history of providing trusted intergenerational information throughout the county, without any limitations such as caregiver age or foster care involvement.

Then we co-designed a new *Live Well* *website hub* to house new and existing kinship content and awareness-raising materials. The *Live Well* site now offers a single-point of entry for the county's kinship families to discover and access the YMCA Kinship Navigator Program, 211, and other community resources.



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

After the Network brought in the University of Kentucky to share its model and organized a presentation from the county's existing peer mentor program for foster parents operated through Grossmont College, the group was unanimously committed to pursuing a peer mentor program for kinship caregivers, including those not involved with foster care.

Leveraging the lessons learned and training assets at Grossmont College, the group worked together to identify and create the components of a peer mentorship pilot program, including the number of mentors and their qualifications, compensation, training, and oversight. We determined a rough budget and measurable outcomes.

Recognizing the contributions of kinship caregivers, especially those who take on the role of raising children and prevent foster care involvement, the County's Child and Family Well-Being Department stepped forward to fund a peer mentor pilot program.



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

The work group developed a new comprehensive promotion toolkit and shared it with county partners. It includes a 2-minute video, adapted from the Network's national kinship video, to raise awareness about the county's kinship families. The toolkit also has a link to request one-hour presentations about kinship families' strengths and needs from a speaker's bureau composed of work group members.

The toolkit also contains a caregiver "Road Map" that we created together and had translated into the county's eight threshold languages. This two-page "Road Map" for kinship caregivers provides key information and was reviewed by the kinship caregiver focus groups.

The toolkit and its accompanying materials are housed on the *Live Well* website.

In 2025, thanks to the efforts of Bridging Systems work group members, the Board of Supervisors for the County of San Diego issued a Proclamation honoring Kinship Care Month. Mary Guerin, one of the lived experience experts who participated from the very beginning of our collaborative Bridging Systems effort, proudly spoke during the Board of Supervisors' proceedings and was presented with a framed proclamation. To Mary, the work of Bridging Systems and the proclamation meant kinship families were no longer invisible.



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.

The work of Bridging Systems is just the beginning of a more coordinated countywide effort to support kinship families. At the last Bridging Systems meeting in September 2026, the group unanimously agreed to continue the kinship promotion campaign and leverage the six YMCA San Diego family events. The passionate and committed group is evolving into a "Kinship Task Force." County and community organization staff from Bridging Systems are tri-chairing the Task Force. The momentum continues: members still meet monthly now that Bridging Systems has ended.

Impact

> “When dedicated funding ended, many kinship family activities continued because Bridging Systems had established the relationships, shared ownership, and cross-system infrastructure needed to sustain them. This marked a shift toward kinship support as a shared commitment across systems rather than siloed work.”
>
> **– Brooke Starros, Network Consultant, Bridging Systems for Kinship Families**

In addition to ensuring the continuity of kinship activities, the growing commitment to the families through the Bridging Systems work allowed County staff to continue devoting their time to this important effort. Among its accomplishments, the group created a website hub providing a single point of entry for kinship families, which was visited by over 800 unique individuals from January through August 2026. That hub includes the Road Map, which has already helped hundreds of kinship caregivers on their caregiving journey.

And this initial impact is just the beginning. The Bridging Systems for Kinship Families work has led to a countywide Kinship Task Force and a promising step toward implementing a kinship peer mentor pilot program.

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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

The Network is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling $9,950,000 with 95 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and $523,684 and 5 percentage funded by non-government sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government. The Network is a project of Generations United.

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