

**MEETING THE NEEDS OF NON-CERTIFIED
KINSHIP CAREGIVERS:
EXPERIENCES IN FIVE COLORADO
COUNTIES**

Executive Summary

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last two decades, placement of children in non-certified kinship settings has been a growing trend in child welfare. The following study assesses the needs of the uncertified kinship care population and examines programs in five Colorado counties to address those needs. Interviews were conducted with child welfare administrators, caseworkers and their supervisors, TANF supervisors, caregivers, kinship alumni, support group coordinators, and mental health providers. Interview protocols examined the interviewees' interaction with the caregivers, child welfare, and/ or the TANF division. Questions focused on the services, supports and training available to both the caregivers and caseworkers. The major areas of need identified by study participants were then organized by theme and discussed in separate sections. The information obtained will help in the design of programs and policies aimed at further supporting the non-certified kinship homes in Colorado.

The responsibilities of Child Welfare in supporting uncertified kinship care are extensive and include overseeing the exchange of a large amount of information between the caseworkers and caregivers, assessing and establishing safe and permanent placements, and ensuring there are knowledgeable caseworkers who are able to individualize the supports and services offered to kinship caregivers. Several approaches used by counties to meet these responsibilities include:

- Establishing specialized kinship units within a child welfare department to focus on the needs of kinship caregivers
- Requiring county training sessions on kinship care for new caseworkers
- Training a specialized kinship caseworker to act as resource to caregivers and caseworkers
- Modifying the SAFE assessment tool and creating a summary focused on safety and permanency
- Providing referral packets and/or orientation sessions and educating caregivers to make informed decisions
- Using group meetings including Team Decision Meetings, Family Group Conferencing and Family Group Decision Making to engage kin in the planning and decision making process
- Creating a Child Welfare computerized county data base to increase caseworker efficiency and improve communication between services used by kinship caregiver

“The majority of kids are in special education so kinship caregivers have to deal with IEPs, school meetings, advocating for child, credit issues for older kids, transportation issues, visitation sessions, court appearances, multiple day treatment appointments all of which can cause work disruptions and disruption of normal family routines, especially if there are two parents who work full-time.”
Child Welfare

Meeting Financial Needs:

Decreasing the financial burden imposed on kinship caregivers was cited as the most significant need by the majority of interviewees. A sample of the approaches used by several counties to help address this need included:

- Educating the community about potential financial resources available to the non-certified caregiver, including TANF Child Only
- Training TANF technicians to better understand and address kinship caregivers' needs
- Creating a TANF Unit specifically to assist the kinship caregivers in accessing TANF Child Only and other supports
- Increasing the caseworkers understanding of TANF through direct training and/or access to a TANF technician for support
- Decreasing the length of time to obtain TANF Child Only eligibility and minimizing the required paperwork involved in maintaining TANF
- Promoting caseworker's ability to use TANF funds creatively with an emphasis on cost-effective, long-term investments
- Providing funds to supplement child care costs for those not eligible of CCCAP

Addressing emotional needs of kinship caregivers:

Interviewees also stressed the need to address the emotional and psychological strain on caregivers caused by the demands of navigating multiple systems and the complex family dynamics that are typical of kinship care arrangements. The approaches used to meet these needs included:

- Referring caregiver to orientation programs provided by child welfare or to other educational resources in the community
- Directing kinship caregiver to support groups either within child welfare or in the community
- Using multiple means of providing needed information and support including phone lines, newsletters and internet sites
- Using TANF funds to offer respite care for kinship caregivers

Meeting the needs of children in kinship care:

For the children in non-certified kinship care, the areas of need fall under three main areas: helping the caregiver support the child, addressing the child's mental health issues, and supporting academic success. Examples of how several counties were addressing those needs included:

- Educating caregivers on how to deal with a child's mental health issues through support from knowledgeable caseworkers, parent education classes and/or psycho-educational support groups
- Funding pro-social activities and providing opportunities to connect children in kin care

- Delivering child and family mental health services within community settings using qualified volunteer mental health providers
- Providing specific support for caregivers to navigate the school system and access special education services

Helping kinship caregivers navigate the legal system:

Non-certified kinship caregivers frequently referred to the demands of managing the legal issues involved in caring for their kin. Methods used to address these legal needs were:

- Establishing partnerships between child welfare and legal clinics or courts to minimize cost and streamline the permanency process
- Including information on legal issues in caregiver information packets and orientation sessions
- Using TANF and other funds to help cover legal fees

Administrative level support:

Many of the needs identified through the interviews require broad support at an administrative level within county agencies. To address those needs, several counties are using the following approaches:

- Identifying the common purposes of Child Welfare and TANF, breaking down silos and creating a “high fidelity” wrap-around county plan to address kinship care needs
- Establishing kinship specialty units within Child Welfare and /or TANF to oversee the assessment, support and training of caregivers and/or caseworkers
- Promoting regular participation of child welfare personnel in community groups and/or in cross-county meetings to share information and experiences related to kinship issues

Overarching themes:

Combining several counties’ innovative practices with the recommendations made by interviewees in other counties, a number of key suggestions to further meet the needs of the non-certified kinship caregivers emerged from this study. These suggestions are as follows:

- Breakdown the ‘silos’ of Child Welfare and TANF by finding common purposes and improving coordination between these two key sources for kinship supports

“For a child, it feels a whole lot better if they are able to say ‘I’m going to grandma’s’ ...sheets smell familiar, I have my stuff there already, cousins are still there, I can still have my dog, same school, I can still see my parents... all the same people still love me.”

Child Welfare
Caseworker

- Provide training for both child welfare caseworkers and TANF technicians to advance their understanding and ability to address kinship caregivers' needs
- Improve access to TANF Child Only and minimize the work involved in maintaining eligibility
- Promote a caseworker's creative and efficient use of funds to meet the *individual* needs of kinship families and create long term and stable kinship placements
- Improve accessibility to a variety of community supports for kinship caregivers and children, particularly in the areas of mental health and school-related issues

Conclusion

Kinship caregivers are making a significant difference in the lives of children who, for a wide range of reasons, are not able to live with their parents. It is encouraging to see more attention paid to this heretofore unsung population of caregivers. The distinctions that have been made between these caregivers, based on the circumstances that compelled them to take in their kin, are less important than the ability of county agencies and non-profit community groups to use funding *flexibly* to meet their *individual* needs. With passage of *Fostering Connections*, and the additional flexibility it allows in the use of Title IVE funding for subsidized guardianship and caregiver education and supports, Congress is acknowledging what the research demonstrates about the potential benefits of kinship care. We hope that many of the approaches taken by the counties included in this study can serve as models for the rest of the state as Colorado implements this new federal law.