

Creating a Unified Kinship Navigator System of Care



NYS Kincare Coalition
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Rethinking Kinship Navigator Services

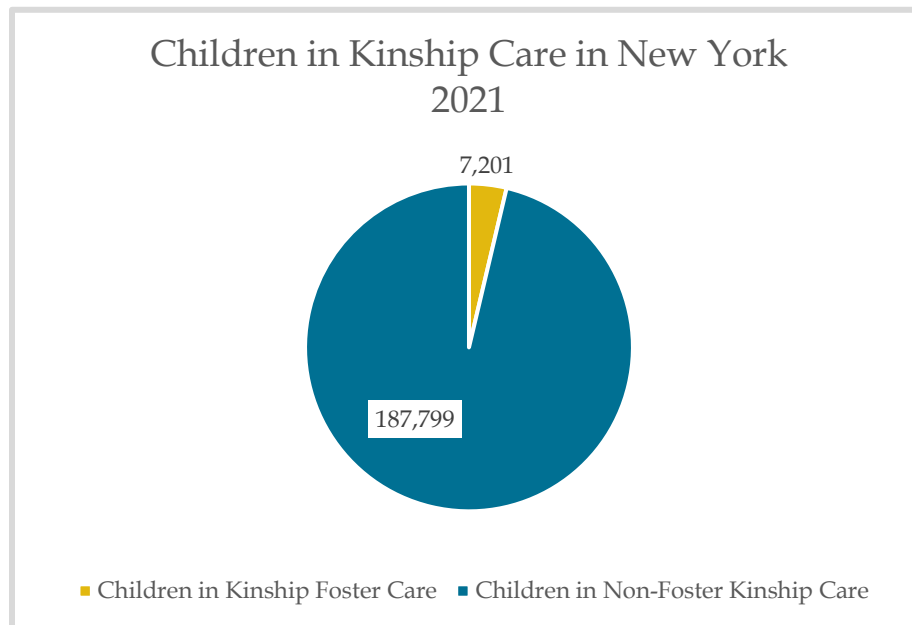
KINSHIP CAREGIVERS AS A RESOURCE FOR CHILDREN

When a child is unable to remain in the home of a parent, research shows that the home of a kinship caregiver is the best place for them to go.ⁱ Family members and close family friends are the natural child welfare support system and were relied on to raise children in need of care long before the current child welfare system was in place. Children in kinship care have similar circumstances to children who are in foster care, often having experienced severe trauma, and they can come to a caregiver's home with a litany of complex behavioral and emotional problems that can be difficult to navigate.ⁱⁱ Kinship caregivers are often asked to take children on a moment's notice. They tend to be older, have limited resources such as fixed income or inadequate housing, and can therefore struggle to provide for a child who otherwise would be on a path for stability and permanency in their home.

Despite the lack of resources available to caregivers, children have been shown to thrive in kinship care due to a number of protective factors that help mitigate the negative effects of trauma. For example, children in kinship care have less frequent placement moves compared to children in foster care with non-kin. They also tend to maintain connections with extended family and birth parents, and as a result have a higher likelihood of being reunified with their parents.ⁱⁱⁱ Children in kinship care are more likely to experience stability and permanency with their kinship caregivers when compared to children in foster care with strangers. Research has shown that 46% of kinship caregivers have children in their home for 5 years or longer.^{iv}

At present approximately 4% of all kinship children are placed into kinship foster care. This is an established pathway facilitated through child protective services when CPS removes a child from their parent's home and places them with kin who are or are willing to become certified foster parents. The majority of children in kinship care are there informally. Meaning, CPS and/or the custodial parent has agreed to place the children with a kinship caregiver without the child being placed into the foster care system. This arrangement results in caregivers having no access to the resources and supports provided to certified foster parents.

Research indicates that 46% of kinship caregivers have children in their home for 5 years or longer.



Connecting kinship caregivers to available community resources, providing training on raising children exposed to trauma, offering legal assistance to help navigate complex court proceedings, and providing respite are just a few of the types of services they need to help the children in their care thrive. While foster care offers a robustly funded system of supports, informal kinship families have fewer services and supports available.

A HISTORY OF KINSHIP SERVICES

In 2006, New York began investing state funds for kinship supports meant to serve the non-foster care kinship community. A kinship navigator service was enacted through budget language that would allow “for services and expenses of the Catholic Family Center in Rochester to establish, operate, and administrate a statewide kinship information and referral network.” The program was appropriated \$250,000 to provide this service to the kinship community across all of New York State. In addition to the statewide kinship navigator, a total of \$750,000 was appropriated to establish and fund “kinship care demonstration programs” which was used to fund localized kinship care case management services throughout the state.

Prior to 2006, a handful of community agencies received small amounts of funding from local departments of social services and private funders and operated localized kinship case management services. Little had been done to consolidate the efforts of these programs under one umbrella until the state began investing in services for these families.

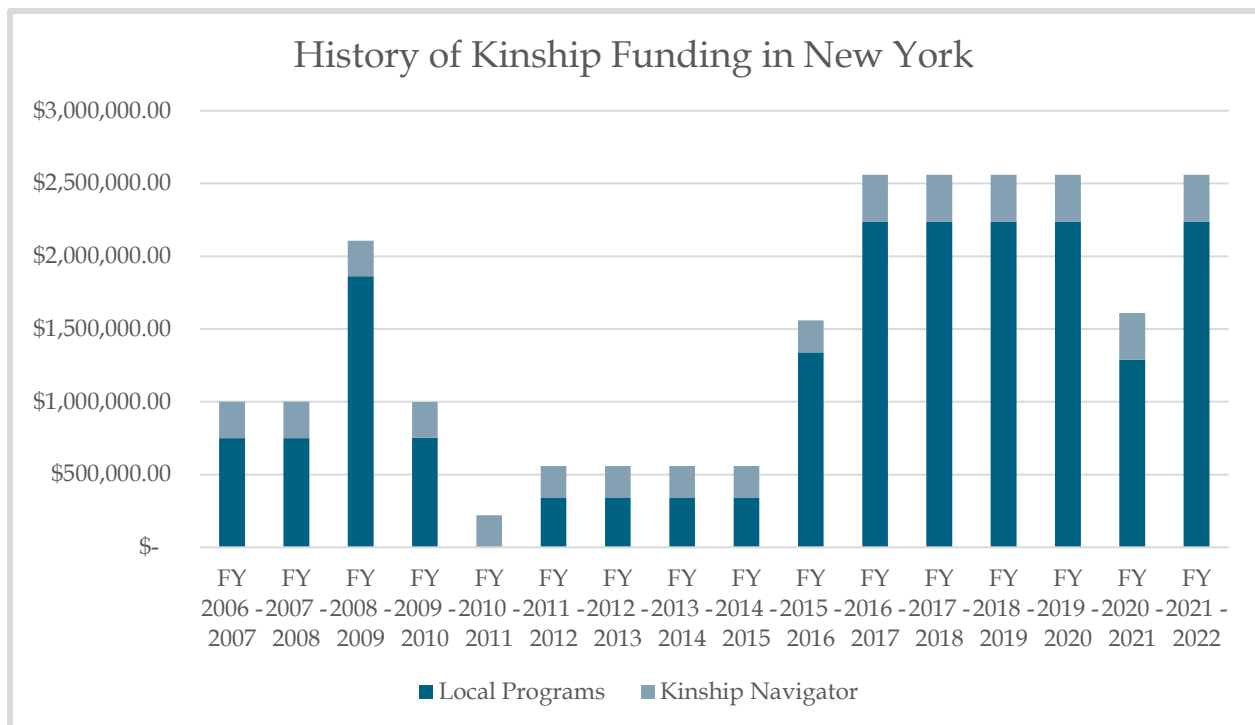
Funding for kinship services has been unstable. Dozens of programs around the state have opened and then abruptly closed their doors to kinship caregivers due to loss of funding or to the uncertainty in the stability of the funds they received. As a result,

kinship caregivers are less likely to access available resources like public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, and other needed benefits.

According to a study done by Chapin Hall, only 12% of eligible kinship children in New York are receiving a special public assistance grant called the Non-Parent Caregiver Grant (also known as the Child Only grant), a grant available for children living with non-parents.^v This grant, funded completely by federal TANF dollars, usually amounts to roughly \$400 per month for one child (\$150 for a second and beyond), and most children living with kin who are not in foster care or receiving another source of income are eligible for the subsidy.

Only 12% of eligible children in kinship care receive the Child-Only Grant

Reasons for the lack of enrollment in the subsidy include a general lack of knowledge of the existence of the subsidy, difficulty in filling out the application, and inability to produce needed legal documents such as a birth certificate or social security number. If kinship support services were readily available, barriers to supports like the grant would be minimized. For example, in the 25 counties that currently have local kinship care case management services there are 15,108 children who are in receipt of the Non-Parent Grant. In the remaining 37 counties, there are only 5,850 children in receipt of the grant.



In 2021, \$2.2 million dollars in appropriated funds for localized kinship care case management services goes to fund 14 programs that serve 25 counties, and each

program receives \$150,000. Catholic Family Center's statewide kinship navigator receives \$320,500 to serve all 62 counties in New York.

NEED FOR REFORM

Due to the current funding structure of New York's kinship services, the system has been a rotating door of private agencies applying for a grant every 3-5 years from the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). With each round of funds comes a new batch of programs who start from nothing and try to build a meaningful service for kinship caregivers in their community over the course of the grant period. When new grants have been issued the older, more established programs have often been defunded in favor of new programs falling in unserved New York state regions, leaving kinship caregivers without the supports of programs in smaller communities, and forcing experienced kinship professionals to move on to other areas of expertise. This way of funding kinship services has been a disservice to the kinship community and is in desperate need of reform.

In 2018, the Families First Prevention Services Act opened up funding for kinship navigator services through Title IV-E if those services could meet an evidence based standard. A 50% reimbursement of funds spent by the state on kinship navigator services could be claimed if the service provided was approved by the national clearinghouse. As of November 2021, one program in Ohio has been approved by the clearinghouse. New York has been engaged in implementation and evaluation of its kinship services in an effort to meet the standards set forth by the FFPSA but has yet to submit collected data to meet the difficult standards. OCFS has entrusted the Catholic Family Center's (CFC) kinship navigator program to be the pass-through for all federal demonstration project funds, and CFC has in turn partnered with local agencies to run programs intended to be evaluated for the clearinghouse.

This experience has shown that CFC is viewed by OCFS and local agencies to be the central source for kinship services in New York. The vast experience of the staff at CFC alongside the consistency in kinship navigator service provision since its inception in 2006 has made it the leading agency for kinship care in New York.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO KINSHIP FUNDING

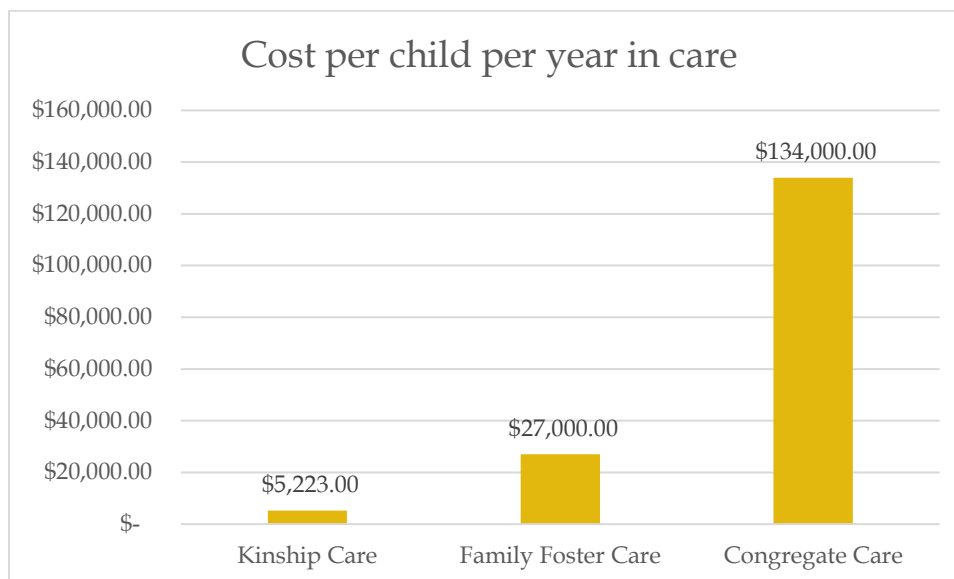
The need to unify the Kinship System of Care under one umbrella has never been greater. As New York transitions into implementation of the FFPSA, it has been estimated that kinship caregiving will increase as a result of fewer children going into foster care. Having services available to families that meet the needs they present with will be increasingly important in order to ensure that children who have been diverted from foster care stay out of foster care and can remain safely in the homes of kinship caregivers. Creating a unified statewide kinship navigator by consolidating the current system into one entity with a physical presence regionally throughout the state will help streamline services for caregivers and ensure they have access to robust information, case management, legal, and respite services.

Catholic Family Center has recently merged with Catholic Charities Community Services, creating a newer, much larger agency called Catholic Charities Family and Community Services. As a large regional agency with the long-standing statewide kinship navigator history, it is well-suited to be the host of a larger statewide kinship navigator service.

Ohio's department of family services, which has been given \$8 million by the Ohio state legislature to operate a kinship navigator program, has similarly subcontracted their service out to an established kinship navigator program called Kinnect Ohio, who has implemented a statewide kinship navigator using a regional model with dozens of staff located throughout the state providing on the ground services to kinship families. This united model is highly replicable for New York State.

New York has an estimated 195,000 children being raised by kinship caregivers. Investing in these children by funding a kinship navigator at \$10 million to be a regional presence available in every county would ensure that these families receive the support they need to thrive.

New York spends an average of \$67,000 per child per year in foster care.^{vi} The NYS Kinship Navigator program, in its current form, serves roughly 4,000 calls per year with a state operating budget of \$320,500. The local programs serve an average of 90 families per year. With the \$2.2 million in local programs, adding in federally funded TANF Non-Parent grant, the average expenditure to support a kinship family has come to roughly \$5,200 per year per child.



At \$10 million dollars, a unified kinship navigator system of care could provide its services for as little as \$2,000 per child per year, all while keeping children out of the foster care system.

Proposed services would include:

- A statewide legal assistance helpline, where kinship caregivers who normally would not have access to legal counsel can obtain free legal consultation from trained lawyers in any kinship related legal matter.
- Regional case management to assist in applying for and obtaining public benefits such as the Non-Parent grant, Medicaid, SNAP, navigation of disability systems, trauma supports, other assistance as needed.
- Regional kinship caregiver training made widely available to caregivers who wish to participate in parenting classes on how to raise children exposed to trauma.
- Regional respite services in partnership with local providers to ensure kinship families have access to much needed respite.
- An informational helpline and website that would serve as the gateway for kinship services and provide information and referral services to kinship families.
- Flexible funds to provide for the immediate physical needs of kinship families
- Outreach to families to engage them in service provision

Since 2006, kinship services have hinged on unstable budget negotiations, causing uncertainty for the programs who are engaged in services. New York should follow the lead of other states who have enacted legislation directing the Office of Children and Family Services to establish a comprehensive kinship navigator program. While this will not guarantee funding stability from year to year, it will ensure that kinship services remain a top priority for the state. Appendix A has recommended language for a bill to establish a comprehensive kinship navigator.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pass the bill to enact a unified kinship navigator service
2. Fund the unified kinship navigator service at \$10 million dollars
3. Pass the kinship legislative agenda

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ⁱ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28348199/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gu.org/resources/the-state-of-grandfamilies-in-america-2017/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28348199/>

^{iv} <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-434.pdf>

^v <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/tanf-child-only-cases-who-are-they-what-policies-affect-them-what-being-done>

^{vi} <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:fa79c1db-64c6-4b91-8fd4-3e454034fbea#pageNum=2>

APPENDIX A: Kinship Navigator Bill Language

Social Services Law

ARTICLE 8-C: STATEWIDE KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

467: Establishment

Statewide Kinship Navigator program; establishment.

The statewide kinship navigator program is established within the office of children and family services. The program is established to assist kinship caregivers who are seeking information regarding, or assistance obtaining, services and benefits available at the state and local level that address the needs of those caregivers residing in each county. The program shall provide to kinship caregivers information, referral services and assistance obtaining support services including, but not limited to, the services outlined in subsection four hundred sixty-seven - c of this article.

467-A: Definitions

"Kinship caregiver" shall mean any caregiver as defined by subdivision twenty-two of section three hundred seventy-one of this article who is currently caring for a child or is a prospective kinship caregiver.

§ 467-B. Responsibilities of the commissioner.

The commissioner shall through contract administer a kinship navigator program that shall include but not be limited to:

1. statewide coordination;
2. provision of information as to the availability of, eligibility criteria for, and application procedure for available benefits and services;
3. coordination of efforts among state agencies including, but not limited to, the department of health, the office for the aging, the education department, the office of temporary and disability assistance, the office of addiction services and supports and local departments of social services and community agencies;
4. compilation of statistical data from state and local agencies and dissemination to the public;
5. The commissioner shall divide the state into not less than seven and not greater than twelve regions for the kinship care navigator program to establish regional expertise in.

467-C: Grants

Grant to a community organization. The commissioner shall

make a grant within the amount appropriated therefore to a community-based organization or consortia of community-based organizations to operate the statewide kinship navigator program.

The activities of the program shall include but not be limited to:

1. operation of a toll-free telephone number that may be called to obtain basic information about the rights of, and services available to, kinship caregivers, including but not limited to;
2. access to free legal consultation for kinship caregivers who are in need of legal assistance;
3. local respite services;
4. training related to caring for children;
5. assisting kinship caregivers in applying for public assistance, including Medicaid, publicly funded childcare, food stamps, and other services.

APPENDIX B: Kinship Navigator Budget Language

For services and expenses of the Office of Children and Family Services to establish, operate, and administrate a statewide Kinship Navigator program. Such funds are available pursuant to a plan prepared by Catholic Charities Family and Community Services and approved by the office of children and family services and the director of the budget to consolidate existing programs with existing contractors that are satisfactorily performing as determined by the office of children and family services and to expand service provision to comply with federally approved standards. Such plan shall provide for submission of information regarding outcome-based measures that demonstrate quality of services provided and program effectiveness to the office in a form and manner and at such times as required by the office\$10,000,000