

Kinship Care Maintains Caring Connections

In some child welfare cases, children must be temporarily removed from their birth parents' home. The goal of out-of-home care is to place children with a safe adult while their parents make changes to ensure a safe and stable home. However, the experience of separation, even in situations where it is necessary, can be destabilizing and stressful for children.

Maintaining a child's existing supportive relationships is almost always better than removing them from their community. When children and youth must live outside their birth parents' homes, research shows that they often fare better in kinship placements than when placed with strangers.¹

While we know kinship caregivers are important, current systems do not always provide sufficient resources to support them. By increasing financial and logistical support, eliminating discrepancies in requirements between kinship caregivers and unrelated foster parents, and including like-kin caregivers in kinship care programming, we can increase the number of children in out-of-home care who are able to stay with adults they know.

WHAT IS KINSHIP CARE?

- *Kinship care* is the placement of youth in the care of non-parent relatives, such as grandparents, or like-kin adults who have existing relationships with youth and their families, such as family friends. Kinship care is often informal, but here we will focus on official placements in the child welfare system.
- *Like-kin caregivers* are often included in the definition of kinship care¹ and like-kin placements have similar positive impacts on stability and outcomes as placements with relatives. However, current policies in Wisconsin distinguish between them when it comes to support programs and legal requirements.

WHY IS KINSHIP CARE IMPORTANT?

Kinship care (including like-kin care) is beneficial for children's relationships and emotional wellbeing. The positive impacts of kinship care affect individuals and families, but also system interventions and long-term costs.

- Children in kinship care child welfare placements are more likely to:
 - Remain with their siblings.²
 - Report feeling loved and wanting to stay in the placement home.²
 - Experience fewer changes in placements and schools.²
 - Maintain and restore connections with their families and communities.³
 - Experience fewer psychiatric disorders and behavioral problems.³
- Kinship caregivers are less likely than unrelated foster parents to request a change of placement due to behavioral challenges.⁴
 - At Wellpoint, we often work with kinship caregivers who take in children with intensive behavioral care needs when they are turned away from treatment foster care homes and group facilities.
- Kinship care leads to lower system costs over the long term:
 - Mitigates the need for more intensive and costly intervention from the child welfare system.¹
 - Helps meet the need for foster homes.
 - Better mental health outcomes decrease the need for intensive and costly mental health care and crisis interventions.⁵

Of course, not all children have adults in their lives who are able or willing to provide kinship care. In those situations, unrelated foster parents are the best option. If we can ensure that all kinship caregivers who want to take in children can do so, more unrelated licensed foster parents will be available to take in children who cannot be placed with kin.

Kinship caregivers, including like-kin adults, need support that matches the critical role they play in maintaining stability for many children in out-of-home care.

Current policies recognize the importance of kinship care. The federal Family First Prevention Services Act prioritizes kinship placements where possible, and the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services has established a contract performance measure that targets 40% of foster care placements in Milwaukee County to be kinship placements in FY 2021-22.



However, current conditions do not make it easy for families to partner with us to achieve this goal. Wisconsin currently trails other states in providing compensation that ensures kinship caregivers can afford to meet children's needs.

- In Wisconsin, licensed foster parents receive a basic monthly payment of \$420-\$545 depending on the type of license (the national average foster care payment is \$511¹). Additional benefits include childcare subsidies, mental health counseling, and supplemental payments for certain circumstances.
 - Some kinship caregivers become licensed to receive higher payments and/or to be eligible to become permanent legal guardians.
- Kinship caregivers who have not completed the licensing process receive only \$300 (increased from \$254 as of January 2022). They have access to some of the other benefits licensed foster parents receive, but not supplemental payments.
 - Relatives working with Wellpoint often request a change of placement because they cannot afford the cost of caregiving even with the kinship care payment, not because they do not want to continue the foster relationship.
- Like-kin caregivers are often preferred placements similar to relatives, but they do *not* qualify for kinship benefits. Like-kin caregivers must become licensed foster parents before they can receive any benefits or provide a long-term placement.
 - Like-kin placements typically have a court-ordered deadline before which caregivers must become licensed foster parents. If they are unable to obtain a license, children in their care must be relocated, causing unnecessary destabilization.
 - At Wellpoint, we see many like-kin placements fall through either because the licensing process takes too long, or because caregivers can't afford to continue the placement without any financial support.
- There is a discrepancy in current background check requirements: relatives applying for kinship care benefits may be rejected for an offense that would not disqualify a licensed foster care applicant. For example, a relative can be rejected for a kinship placement due to a misdemeanor battery conviction, but a licensed foster parent applicant will not be barred for the same conviction.

Many people who want to take care of their family or like-kin children need additional assistance to ensure they can afford to meet basic and urgently arising needs of children in their care. However, they face barriers:

- Like-kin caregivers must meet certain housing space requirements to become licensed. However, without benefits the cost of a larger space is often a barrier, creating a Catch-22. (See our housing brief for more information)
- If a kinship caregiver becomes the payee for a child who receives Supplementary Security Income (disability) benefits, they lose access to the childcare subsidy paid to foster caregivers. SSI benefits are rarely sufficient to cover the cost of childcare on top of other expenses, which is necessary for any caregivers to be able to work.

Fortunately, there are some relatively straightforward changes we can make to ensure that kinship caregivers, including like-kin adults, are set up for success so more children have the chance to maintain their existing caring connections.



WELLPOINT RECOMMENDS

As the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families implements the federal Families First Prevention Services Act reforms, where kinship care will be prioritized, we need to make it easier for caregivers with existing relationships to take in children. We recommend the following investments and changes:

- **Officially classify like-kin adults as kinship caregivers** in order to remove barriers to being priority caregivers for like-kin adults with low incomes.
- **Increase baseline monthly payments for kinship caregivers**, so they can afford to take in a child regardless of whether they choose to become licensed foster parents.
- **Establish consistency in barrable criminal offenses** between kinship caregivers and licensed foster parents.
- **Update regulations to ensure that kinship caregivers do not lose access to childcare subsidies when they take in a child who receives SSI benefits.**

By better supporting kinship caregivers, including like-kin adults, we can provide every child the opportunity to live in a home that gives them the best chance to thrive.

REFERENCES

- ¹Annie E. Casey Foundation, "[Keeping Kids in Families: Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placement](#)" 2017.
- ²Generations United, "[Children Thrive in Grandfamilies](#)" 2016.
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- ⁴Center for the Study of Social Policy, "[A Critical Resource at Risk: Supporting Kinship Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond](#)" 2020.
- ⁵US Center for Disease Control, "[Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence](#)" 2019.
- ⁶American Bar Association, "[Kinship Care is Better for Children and Families](#)" 2017.

CONTACT

Ann Leinfelder Grove, President & CEO, Wellpoint Care Network: (414) 465-1323,
aleinfeldergrove@sainta.org

Jason Childress, Director of Public Affairs, Foley & Lardner LLP: 608-217-6109,
jchildress@foley.com

ABOUT WELLPOINT CARE NETWORK

Wellpoint Care Network is an evolving, community-facing human services organization based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As a national leader in recognizing and addressing the impact of trauma, Wellpoint has been caring for children for more than 170 years.

Championing families, Wellpoint offers a comprehensive array of prevention, intervention and crisis resources to facilitate equity, learning, healing and wellness by restoring the connections that help children and families thrive.

Learn more at wellpoint.org.

