

Kinship Navigators: the new child welfare system

By Gerard Wallace

With enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (FC), federal child welfare policy finally provides funding for services to the private informal kinship community. The Act targets at least five million dollars for "kinship navigators" to help "children who are in, or at risk of entering foster care reconnect with family members." FC may signal a new direction in child welfare policy and practice, where private kinship caregivers become part of state plans and agencies focus resources on private kinship families.

First and foremost

Kinship care refers to children who are living with relatives or fictive kin who assume parental duties. Kinship care is our traditional child welfare system, a natural resource, operating for millennia before the institution of the foster care system and public or formal kinship care. Kinship is at the center of our family values, President Barack Obama's grandparents were his kinship caregivers and President George Washington cared for two step-grandchildren and a niece.

Kinship caregivers live in every community. Everyone knows a kinship family. Across America, this private system cares for at least twelve times more children than foster care, gets better outcomes for children (see Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, June 2008), and costs much less.

Federal kinship policies

Prior to the Fostering Connections Act, federal child welfare laws centered on kin as a "preferred option" for placement and federal aging laws permitted discretionary use of 10% of the Older American's Act's "Caregiver Support Program" funding for kinship care. The preference applies only to caregivers who interact with local child welfare agencies. The aging funding only supports caregivers over 55 years.

FC's Section 102 provides services to all kinship families. While the Act and its corresponding Request for Application (RFA) narrowly defined "navigator" as an information and referral system (I&R), it permits applicants to join information and referral with any of three other program elements, intensive family finding efforts (locator), family group decision-making conferencing, and residential family treatment. The first two closely align with kinship direct services. Locators are a form of outreach and conferencing is a direct service. Of note, both practices tie navigators to formal child welfare planning and its utilization of kin as a resource.

New kinship navigators

In September, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) named its grantees, awarding twenty-four grants. Six are navigators, three are navigators and family finding, four are navigators, family finding, and family group decision making, one is family group decision making, one is family group decision making and family finding, and five are residential family treatment programs. Some of the navigators also provide services beyond I&R, apparently via the "ombudsman" option of the RFA. Two New England programs were funded: Maine and Rhode Island. Both add other RFA elements to their navigators.

Maine's project has three parts, including family conferencing and family finding. It builds upon the existing MaineKids program with a research project designed to study whether enhanced services make a difference. Families will be randomly selected in to enhanced services, and they and a control group will participate in the evaluation. The enhanced services will be offered as a menu, like MaineKids' other services, and will include volunteer court navigators, personalized mental health education, and a navigator who meets face

to face with the family providing a more comprehensive service. A second is public agency staff training in kinship care and family team meetings for kinship families which are often more complex than typical. The third is family finding for teens in foster care.

Rhode Island's grant is for a startup navigator that will utilize family finding and assist with family conferencing. The program will provide an I&R website, designed with help of the "GrandDivas," a grandparent advocacy group and be accessed via 211.

Existing kinship statewide programs

Kinship navigators have used diverse strategies to increase access to services and supports. Definitions of "navigator" vary from strictly I&R, and system to system, ranging from strictly I&R, using a website or website plus call center, to I&R plus limited advocacy-assistance, to I&R plus direct services offering case management and/or other direct services.

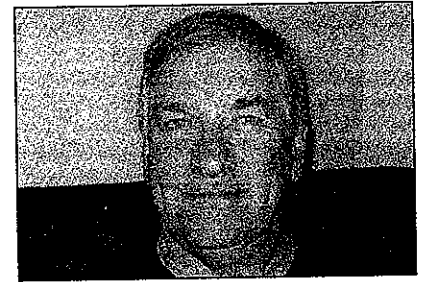
Navigators already operate in a state neighboring New England; New York offers a website and call center; www.nysnavigator.org. Connecticut provides web-based 211 information, www.211ct.org/focus/kinshiplist.asp and some other states in the region are moving towards implementation. In New Hampshire, an employee of the Division of Children, Youth and Family Bureau for Community and Family Support is dedicated to relative care policy, program and training development, and acts as a resource for both the public and private kinship communities. (see article on page 4) Vermont has a privately funded effort, Vermont Kin, vermontkinparents.com (see front page article). Only Massachusetts has no statewide effort, although recently the state aging agency published an information booklet, and the New England programs are part of the second and third wave of navigators. Other state programs include Ohio, California, Florida, Georgia, Washington State, New Jersey, and New York.

As basic information and referral systems, these programs follow standards for I&R, which can be found in the standards of the Council on Accreditation and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. Programs also employ different delivery personnel. In New Jersey, case workers from the child welfare agency take calls and make referrals to local direct services funded by the navigator; grandparents take calls and make referrals in Florida; navigator MSW's answer and make referrals to non-associated programs in a network of direct service kinship programs in New York state; and in a decentralized system, funded mostly by local county agencies, agency staff in Ohio provide services including support groups and some case management.

Information and access

Services accessed are divided into:

1. general services, where kinship families often meet barriers to access due to laws, regulations, and practices that do not recognize them or fail to identify their needs;
2. child welfare services, where kin may be viewed as a resource but in practice they are not treated as partners (for instance, diversion from foster care, failures to place with kin post initial non-relative placements, limited use of kin as a placement option, etc.);
3. specialized services provided by other kinship programs (support groups, respite, parenting education, and special programs targeting challenges attributed to trauma, loss, bereavement, and disabilities); and
4. legal assistance (legal information, cited legal fact sheets, guides, advocacy, attorney consultations, volunteers and/or staff attorneys who can provide representation in contested proceedings).



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Finding out what works

Prior to FC legislation, kinship navigators, either non-profits or public agencies, were usually administered thru the state child welfare as in New York or through an aging agency as in Georgia and Connecticut. As, FC firmly embeds kinship care as a child welfare policy, it is likely that more state child welfare agencies will seek funding for such programs. Also, given that the newly funded programs are demonstration projects, it is likely that many state child welfare agencies will look to follow emerging models. Navigator programs are likely to become a permanent part of child welfare agency planning, both at the state and local levels.

Which caregivers get served, what services are provided, and what outcomes are expected are yet to be decided. Part of the discussion will center on placement options for children in foster care – private versus public kinship care, and on the use of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds and Title IV-E. Just how far policies will favor private kinship care may depend on the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) outcomes that the new programs will measure –well-being, stability, permanency, and reunification. Clearly, what's good for the goose (children in public kinship care) should be good for the gander (children in private kinship care), and all children should live in families who achieve the CFSR standards. But with the prospect of continued low level funding, navigators will need to succeed in order to convince federal policy makers that help for private kinship families is cost effective and produces better outcomes for children.

Potential for reforms

For the kinship community, Fostering Connections signals a new direction which they hope will lead to more favorable policies focused on private kinship care. Such policies are not only related to assistance. The kinship community is very aware that many issues are about their right to care for children. While family law is mainly state law, there are areas for federal reforms which could support private kinship care. For instance, federal education laws that support residential determinations, outreach similar to Food Stamps for kin to access child-only grants, mandates pushing child welfare agencies to target private kinship care, and programs assisting incarcerated parents to assist children in care with relatives are examples.

Kinship advocates hope that Fostering Connections starts a new era of child welfare policy and planning. Perhaps, our tradition of family care will finally be fully integrated into the child welfare system.

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For a summary of the Kinship Navigators programs go to www.pal-tech.com.