Developing a Kinship System of Care: Statewide Kinship Navigators and Local Kinship Navigator Programs
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The number of children in kinship care is surging, driven primarily by the impact of the heroin/opioid crisis. A focused response to this child welfare crisis involves steps towards development of a kinship system of care that will assist all kinship families.

Such a system focuses on “kinship navigators,” which are recently funded by the Families First Act and Omnibus Appropriations Act. The Families First Act added requirements for evidenced based programs (promising, supported, and well-supported practices) to the Fostering Connections “navigator” requirements. Together these requirements present questions about what kind of programs may qualify for kinship navigator funding.

In order to fund kinship navigators that can support the needs of kinship families and improve outcomes, it’s important to use these funds to devise a kinship system of care that addresses the barriers to success that are actually faced by kinship families.

Based upon our experience in New York, supported by kinship service providers in other states, the threshold needs of kinship caregivers are to understand their rights, responsibilities, benefits and services. They need information and guidance navigating multiple systems, especially regarding two situations:
- becoming a caregiver
- supporting a caregiver

Becoming a caregiver usually involves engaging with parents and/or child welfare agencies, often in court proceedings. Navigator supports include advocacy, education, and legal assistance and result in kin assuming one of the following legal arrangements. Kin become:
- informal custodians (no court order)
- legal custodians
- legal guardians
- foster parents
- quasi-foster parents
- kinship guardians
- adoptive parents

For each of these lawful arrangements, caregivers have different rights and benefits regarding:
- authority (medical care, schooling, records, etc.)
- security (legal right to maintain custodial care)
- financial assistance (child-only grant, social security, etc.)
- benefits/services (child care, access to service systems, etc.)
To support needs, kinship navigators also initially target access to TANF financial assistance, legal assistance, and other available services.

Kinship Navigators inform and assist on all the above issues. There are two types of Navigators:
- Indirect services (online websites and help lines)
- Direct services (case management, support groups, etc.)

The array of Kinship Navigator services can be expanded, concomitant with available funding, eventually incorporating the following elements of a kinship navigator system of care:

1. Information, Referral, and Education (core elements)
2. Stabilization Services
3. Permanency Services
4. Specialized Services
5. Ancillary Services
6. Collaborations
(See handout excerpted from CWLA 2017 publication for description of each element).

As part of a kinship system of care, each state could have a statewide kinship navigator that meets the requirements of the Family Connections grant as described in Sec. 427. [42 U.S.C. 627]. Such programs could be similar to the statewide NYS Kinship Navigator, that together with 22 local kinship “direct” services that meet evidenced based requirements, present a unified system of kinship services that addresses all six elements.

The NYS Kinship Navigator, as part of its Fostering Connections demonstration project, piloted a model of collaboration with local kinship programs and local Temporary Assistance and Child Welfare agencies. The statewide program provided a central repository of state-specific kinship information accessible to all caregivers and to the professional community. Additionally, it can educate state policy makers on the value and needs of kinship families. See www.nysnavigator.org. Since this model’s inception in NYS in 2006, which was successfully demonstrated in the federal project, this system can reach the largest number of kinship families and effectively provide an array of services to meet their needs and improve outcomes.

Recommendation:
Consider how funds for kinship navigators in the Families First Act and Omnibus Appropriations Act can develop a kinship system of care that includes:

1) statewide kinship navigator indirect services, and
2) local direct kinship navigator services,

that together comprise a unified system of care with all six kinship navigator service elements.