



# Keeping Families Together: Enhancing Kinship Care Through State Policy

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## Introduction

Republicans and Democrats alike are putting a new emphasis on kinship care in their child welfare policymaking.

Kinship care refers to the full-time care of children by relatives or extended family. It can also include other adults with close ties to a family or child, known as fictive kin. Kinship care arrangements occur both within and outside of the child welfare system and are often unanticipated. In 2024, [about 2.5 million U.S. children](#) lived with grandparents, extended family or close family friends, and nearly 6% were placed in kinship care through the child welfare system, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation.









Research consistently shows that kinship care produces [better outcomes](#) for children whose parents were unable to care for

them than traditional foster care settings. Through policies governing kinship placements and providing resources for kin, state policymakers can ease burdens on caregivers while safely promoting the use of kinship placements in foster care.

## Kinship Care As Foster Care

For more than 50 years, the child welfare system has focused on three primary goals: ensuring children's safety, enabling permanency for children and promoting the well-being of children and their families. To achieve these goals, the child welfare system provides a [continuum of services](#), according to the U.S. Children's Bureau, from [preventing child maltreatment](#) to foster care, permanency planning to long-term supports for children and youth involved in the system. Initially, the foster care system was designed to ensure the safety of children facing harm by removing them from their parents and placing them in foster homes. Today, when a child needs to be

## Benefits of Kinship Care Placements for Foster Children

 <p>Reduced trauma by providing familiarity and continuity of familial ties.</p>	 <p>Improved mental health outcomes.</p>	 <p>Better behavioral and social outcomes.</p>	 <p>Increased educational outcomes.</p>
 <p>Greater stability and higher levels of permanency.</p>	 <p>Deepened connections with the child's community of origin.</p>	 <p>Stronger ties to the child's biological family.</p>	 <p>Greater satisfaction for children and youth, including feelings of love and belonging.</p>

Source: American Bar Association, *Benefits of Kinship Placement* (2022)

removed for safety reasons, the Administration for Children and Families [prioritizes placements with relatives](#) and others already known to the child, preventing additional trauma and ideally keeping the child in the same community and school district. The federal government and many states are adopting “kin-first” policies that align with this approach.

In traditional foster care settings, nonrelative foster parents self-select to care for children. They receive training and support ahead of placement and have time and options in weighing the costs and burdens of supporting children who have experienced trauma and have an open child welfare case. Foster parents receive a monthly stipend to offset the costs of providing food, shelter, clothing and other related expenses, and some states offer respite care and child care.

For kin families, this process looks different. Kin families are often contacted by a child welfare agency letting them know that one or more children they know have experienced abuse or neglect, and that the children need an immediate and potentially long-term place to stay. Many kin and potential kin providers, especially grandparents living on retirement and a fixed budget, [face financial constraints](#) and may not have the time or resources to secure basic items to care for children. These financial burdens and other constraints disproportionately impact families of color, which can preclude them from being a placement option.

Over the past two decades, the number of children being placed in kinship care has increased by 14%, according to a [report from Casey Family Programs](#). In 2024, the Children's Bureau [reported](#) that 170,955 children entered into foster care; more than 40% were placed with kin (17% in licensed placements and 26% in unlicensed placements). In its annual count that year, the bureau reported a total of 328,963 children in foster care, with 39% in kinship placements (22% in licensed placements and 17% in unlicensed placements). As shown below, these percentages vary widely by state.

## Federal Efforts to Promote Kinship Care

Since the late 1990s, Congress has increasingly promoted kinship placements with the following enactments:

- [Adoption and Safe Families Act](#) (1996): Recognizes kinship care as a legal permanency option.
- [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act](#) (2008): Includes provisions that encourage kinship care placements, including the use of Title IV-E funds for kinship guardians, among other [key provisions](#), according to the Children's Bureau.

- [Family First Prevention Services Act \(2018\)](#): Encourages kinship care when placement is necessary, provides federal funding for evidence-based kinship navigator programs and requires states to review their kinship care licensing standards.
- [Separate Licensing or Approval Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes \(2023\)](#): Authorizes child welfare agencies to use Title IV-E funding for foster care maintenance payments for kinship placements licensed or approved through standards that differ from non-relative, licensed placement providers.
- [Child and Family Services Review Technical Bulletin #14 \(December 2025\)](#): Focuses on durable outcome improvements through the CFSR process, in part by launching the Administration for Children and Families’ initiative, “[A Home for Every Child](#),” prioritizing kinship placements.

## Foster Care Placements in Kinship Care

Number and Percentage by State

State	Foster Placements in Kinship Care		State	Foster Placements in Kinship Care	
	Percent	Number		Percent	Number
AL	16%	945	MT	44%	967
AK	46%	1,084	NE	44%	1,597
AZ	49%	4,438	NV	42%	1,648
AR	31%	1,076	NH	35%	412
CA	38%	14,756	NJ	50%	1,395
CO	37%	1,432	NM	41%	914
CT	43%	1,383	NY	37%	5,502
DE	19%	100	NC	32%	3,414
DC	22%	118	ND	33%	378
FL	50%	8,680	OH	31%	4,394
GA	22%	2,362	OK	46%	2,809
HI	7%	71	OR	41%	1,797
ID	28%	356	PA	38%	4,283
IL	57%	10,534	PR	14%	335
IN	56%	6,638	RI	40%	657
IA	51%	1,878	SC	27%	907
KS	44%	2,685	SD	32%	531
KY	13%	1,093	TN	11%	1,032
LA	43%	1,889	TX	36%	5,373
ME	44%	1,074	UT	35%	590
MD	23%	836	VT	35%	313
MA	37%	3,182	VA	17%	885
MI	49%	4,753	WA*	38%	4,062
MN	45%	2,641	WV	48%	3,150
MS	38%	1,503	WI	40%	2,428
MO	49%	5,722	WY*	33%	506

Source: *The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), In Foster Care by Living Arrangement (September 30, 2024)*

\*Did not submit data in 2024. Using 2023 Child Trends data pulled from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System datasets.

# State Policy Actions to Support and Stabilize Kinship Placements

State legislatures are adopting policies that reflect research showing children in foster care experience better outcomes when placed with relatives. While [efforts vary greatly](#) by state, recent legislative trends include expanding definitions of kinship care, strengthening identification and placement processes, increasing financial supports and access to services for kin and kin-like caregivers, and focusing on permanency while tracking and reporting outcomes.

## DEFINING KINSHIP PROVIDERS

States have [broad authority](#) to define “relative” in compliance with federal policies. These definitions often include fictive kin—individuals who are not related by blood or marriage but have strong emotional ties to the child or family. For example, [Arkansas](#) expanded its definition ([SB 656](#), 2017) to include a person selected by the state’s Division of Children and Family Services who is not related to a child by blood or marriage and has a strong, positive and emotional role in the child’s life or the child’s parent’s life if the child is an infant. The law also requires the director or designee of the division to approve a fictive kin placement for an infant. More recently, [Maryland](#) ([SB 708](#), 2024) altered the definition of kinship caregiver to include an individual who is related to the child through blood, marriage, adoption, tribal law or custom, or cultural custom or practice. This law includes people identified by the child’s parent or an individual who has a significant bond with the child or family. These legislative changes reflect a growing recognition that kinship care encompasses both biological relatives and trusted individuals who can provide stability and continuity for children in foster care.

## IDENTIFYING KIN AND PRIORITIZING KINSHIP PLACEMENTS

Some states have codified kin and fictive kin searches that exceed federal minimum requirements. [Arizona](#) ([HB 2313](#), 2023) requires that if a child is taken into temporary custody, the state’s Department of Child Safety shall use due diligence in an initial search to identify and notify adult relatives or persons with a significant relationship to the child within 30 days. The search must include, among other things, interviews and a review of public records. [California](#) ([AB 2929](#), 2024) requires the court to determine whether a social worker has “continued efforts” to locate relatives, extended family or non-relative extended family members. [Kentucky](#) ([HB 446](#), 2019) requires the biological or legal parent to provide a list of potential persons to be considered as relative or fictive kin placement options, and [Montana](#) ([SB 328](#), 2023) revised the definition of reasonable efforts to include fictive kin in establishing placement preferences.

States are increasingly prioritizing the placement of children with relatives or fictive kin whenever they can be identified. [Texas](#) ([SB 593](#), 2023) requires that kinship placements be considered first if they meet all necessary protective standards. Similarly, [New York](#) ([AB 3496](#), 2021) mandates that kinship placements be prioritized to ensure children have stable connections to their families. Establishing clear guidelines for kinship placements and ensuring that child welfare agencies follow these criteria can significantly benefit children in need of care.

## REDUCING RED TAPE FOR KIN-SPECIFIC LICENSURE

States are adopting kin-specific licensing standards to facilitate timely placement with relatives and ensure relatives quickly get resources they need to care for relative children. Many states offer [provisional licensing](#) to support the placement and needs of children with kin while licensure applications are being processed, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation. As of November 2025, the Children’s Bureau has [approved plans](#) to differentiate licensing standards for kinship providers in 15 states (Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee and Washington) and six tribes.

## PROVIDING SUPPORTIVE SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE TO KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

Casey Family Programs describes [kin-first approaches](#) as a paradigm shift “in which kinship placement is the expectation and goal rather than a practice exception or alternative.” To accomplish this,



states are starting to provide short- and long-term financial and practical supports to kinship providers. These approaches are supported by research from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, understanding that kinship caregivers often need [support](#) to cover the costs and meet the time demands of unexpectedly caring for children.

**Colorado** ([SB 8](#), 2024) provides financial aid to noncertified kinship care homes, expands emergency financial assistance to include goods necessary to meet basic needs, and allocates rental or housing assistance for up to 60 days. The law also requires that kin and relatives be informed about the types of support available to them. **Illinois'** Kinship in Demand, or KIND, Act ([HB 4781](#), 2023) provides supports and guardianship benefits to improve outcomes for youth in relative care. The law increases the capacity of relatives to become caregivers and removes barriers to permanency through guardianship when reunification is not an option. **Kentucky** ([HB 2](#), 2019) requires its Cabinet for Health and Family Services to develop and communicate an array of services to relative and fictive kin caregivers and to track and report on placement outcomes. **Texas** ([HB 4](#), 2017) provides need-based monetary support to relative caregivers who have a family income of less than or equal to 300% of the federal poverty level, among other eligibility criteria, through a caregiver assistance agreement and disbursed in the same manner as foster care payments.

State legislatures are also making it easier for kinship caregivers to access legal and concrete assistance. **Montana** ([SB 162](#), 2023) requires that foster parents, pre-adoptive parents or relatives caring for children in child abuse and neglect proceedings be informed by the state's Department of Public Health and Human Services of the ability to appear, to be heard and to intervene in court proceedings. **Georgia** ([HB 962](#), 2016) authorized its Department of Human Services to provide a separate link or portal on its website informing kinship caregivers how to apply for public assistance benefits, and **Nevada** ([AB 498](#), 2019) provides Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds to fictive kin on behalf of the child.

Additionally, since the passage of the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), the Children's Bureau has approved 11 state plans (Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia and Washington) and Puerto Rico that include evidence-based, [kinship navigator programs](#) to help kin caregivers access resources and services.

## ENSURING LONG-TERM STABILITY

Kinship care placements help maintain family connections and community ties for children in out-of-home placement, increasing placement stability and the likelihood of placement in a forever home.

Thirty-five states and Washington, D.C., have been approved for Title IV-E [Guardianship Assistance Program funding](#) under certain conditions, and 33 states and Washington, D.C. have state-funded guardian assistance programs. These programs provide ongoing subsidies to ensure long-term stability with a relative caregiver when other permanency options are not available or appropriate. Kin guardianship, unlike other permanency options, does not require the termination of parental rights.

Permanency, for children who are placed in foster care, typically has been achieved through one of three means: reunification with parents, adoption or guardianship; however, with the help of young adults with foster care experience and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a new model has emerged: SOUL (Support, Opportunity, Unity and Legal relationships). [Kansas \(HB 2536, 2024\)](#) recently became the first state to codify the model in a program known as [SOUL Family Legal Permanency](#), which allows youth in care to establish legal relationships with kin and kin-like adults without terminating parental rights. The bill, which passed with bipartisan support, is intended to establish a life-long support system for older youth transitioning from foster care.

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