

Supporting Informal Kinship Caregivers

When it is safe and appropriate, children should remain with their parent(s). However, relatives (kin) and friends of the family (fictive kin) often step up to care for children when a parent is unable to provide adequate or safe care. When children are safely cared for in the home of a relative/friend of the family, it eliminates the need for the child to enter foster care. Numerous research studies have found that when children live with a family member, they are more likely to maintain connections to their siblings, community, culture, and other positive support systems, resulting in less traumatic life impacts.

Most kinship placements are “informal” meaning that there is no formal legal removal of the child and there aren’t other critical financial and social supports in place.

Child Protective Services (CPS) may be involved with the family via an investigation or family preservation case, but there could be no CPS involvement at all.

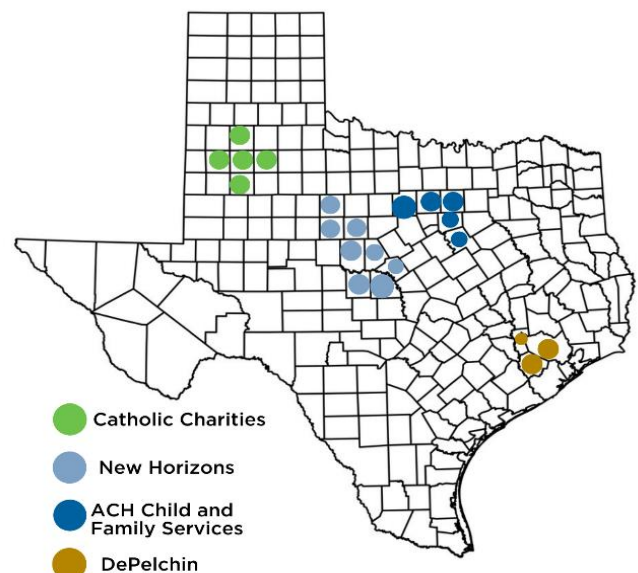
According to Generations United, in 2021, for every 1 child placed with kin in Texas foster care, there were 24 children outside of foster care living with kin.

Informal kin and fictive kin face the same needs as any other parents, but the children they care for often have trauma from the dissolution of their parental relationship. Kin can face additional challenges as they are not eligible for resources that a legal custodial parent (or foster parent) would receive. When Texas can provide the necessary resources that keep children safe within their extended families instead of taking children into legal custody, the state can reduce its reliance on DFPS intervention and improve short and long-term outcomes for children.

Currently, there is limited financial and legal support for informal kinship caregivers. In 2021, Texas began piloting kinship navigator programs in four communities structured to help meet the needs of kinship caregivers. In this pilot, ‘navigators’ guide those kin/fictive kin who are providing care to a non-biological child, connecting them to counseling services, education and other resources. These pilots serve 21 counties, leaving 233 counties in Texas without dedicated support for kinship caregivers.

In a preliminary study conducted in February 2024, 77.4% of caregivers enrolled in the kinship navigator pilots reported feeling they are better able to meet the needs of the children in their care. The report showed additional positive outcomes related to child safety, child/adult wellbeing and referrals/access to services. Once the full evaluation is completed in early 2025,

Kinship Navigator Pilots



these learnings could help shape future efforts to sustain and/or expand the impact of the kinship navigator programs. Moreover, there are additional learnings from other states, such as Indiana, that provide support to kinship caregivers for expenses, like bedding, childcare and travel reimbursement.

While the pilots have been helpful in connecting informal kinship caregivers to resources, additional barriers exist for informal kin to obtain legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the child(ren) in their care. This can complicate their ability to enroll a child in school, advocate for their educational needs, and obtain medical care for the child. To make these decisions, a legal order must be in place, which requires filing for a Suit Affecting the Parent Child Relationship (SAPCR), which is costly and time-consuming.

“Legal is a big one because you can’t get kids Medicaid. You can’t get them into a doctor or a dentist. You can’t sign them up for school unless you have the proper papers. A lot of these grandparents don’t even know where their grown children are, who are the birth parents of these littles. A lot of times acquiring the proper papers is really difficult.”- Kinship Navigator Staff

(Quote taken from UT Health Houston and UTMB health report of Kinship Navigator Programs 2/2024)

To ensure due process for the child’s parent(s), many steps must be taken through the legal process, and the costs associated with these can quickly add up. Information provided by the Foster Care Advocacy Center in Houston identifies the following costs as the most common:

- \$300 per case for service processing**
- \$400 to serve a parent by publication**
- \$2,500 attorney ad litem to represent the parents**
- \$400 paternity testing**
- \$1,000 amicus attorney**
- \$500 half-day mediation**

These are the costs associated with just one child. Oftentimes, families have multiple children in their care, which can bring these costs to a **total of \$7,000-\$10,000**.

While necessary, the fees can be a disincentive for extended families to take responsibility for the child. **To honor and support the aunts, uncles, grandparents and neighbors who have stepped up to ensure that a child they know is safe, loved and provided for, removing these financial barriers is critical to keep the children in their home, eliminating the need for CPS involvement or a removal into foster care.**



Policy Recommendations

TexProtects recommends ensuring all caregivers, including relatives and friends of the family who have stepped in to take care of a child whether or not CPS is involved, are able to access and connect to the resources and supports they need to appropriately care for the child(ren) in their home. TexProtects proposes the following policy strategies:

1. Expand legal and financial support for informal kinship caregivers. Legal remedies such as SAPCRs (Suits Affecting the Parent Child Relationship) and Chapters 32, 34 and 35 temporary authorizations exist to give kinship caregivers authority to make decisions on behalf of the child(ren) in their home but involve substantial fees that kinship caregivers typically cannot afford. Providing a source of funding would lift the burden on these kinship caregivers.
2. Advocate for funding to expand the existing kinship pilots and extend the pilots to additional communities. Currently, these pilots are funded through FAYS with federal Title IV-B funds specifically for that purpose, but this federal funding stream was never intended to be permanent.
3. Advocate for clearer data regarding informal kinship placements to have a better understanding of how often informal placements are utilized and the needs of informal kinship placements over time.

Cost: The cost to continue the current kinship navigator programs would be \$1.3m each year, but expansion is necessary so more kinship caregivers can be served by these programs and other communities across the state can receive the benefit of these services. Expanding the reach of kinship navigator programs would be approximately \$2.3m each year of the biennium. It should be noted that this does not include additional funds for concrete needs.

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