

*Developed by: Patrick Caniglia*

On any given day in Ohio, approximately 228,000 children are unable to reside under their parents' care and support and, as a result, are taken in by extended family or friends.<sup>1</sup> Of these children, about 124,000 live in situations without any parent presence.<sup>1</sup> Despite these growing numbers, Ohio has only 7,200 licensed foster homes.<sup>2</sup> Instead, thousands of children whose parents are deemed unfit to provide adequate care are placed into the temporary or permanent care of kinship caregivers – often grandparents lacking the capacity or resources to raise growing grandchildren. This need is magnified within Appalachian Ohio, where the raging drug epidemic, rising domestic violence cases, and increasing economic instability magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to more and more grandparents and other kin tasked with raising children.<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> Past policy efforts intended to build bridges between kinship caregivers and services are not enough to keep up with the child welfare system's growing needs.

Specifically, licensed foster parents receive approximately twice as much state financial assistance as kinship caregivers. Beyond state assistance, kinship caregivers receive little in the way of mentorship or guidance on caregiving practices, available resources, or parenting skills. These deficits in support suggest the need for more responsive policies and processes to connect kinship caregivers efficiently and sustainably with the resources necessary to successfully meet the needs of their at-risk children.

As a result of current policies and practices, it is difficult for kinship caregivers to access support unless they are registered foster parents. This creates a number of challenges for kinship caregivers, including:

- Kinship caregivers often struggle to balance caregiving with other work and family responsibilities.
- Kinship caregivers often lack knowledge of resources that may be available in their communities.
- Many kinship caregivers (especially grandparents) may experience physical or cognitive issues that limit their effectiveness in the caregiving role.
- Kinship caregivers may be severely challenged to meet the financial costs of caregiving.

As a result, many kinship caregivers struggle to balance their caregiving responsibilities with other areas of their lives. Through increased assistance to kinship caregivers, support would be maximized, reducing a child's costs within the welfare system and as potential multisystem youth requiring intervention from multiple agencies. Increased kinship care support would simultaneously reduce barriers for grandparent caregivers by limiting the need to apply for several different assistance programs such as WIC, SSI, SNAP, and subsidized childcare. In

<sup>1</sup> *The new face of kinship care: What CASAs need to know*. Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ohiocasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/F08-New-Face-of-Kinship-Care.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *2019 PCSAO Factbook*. Public Children Services Association of Ohio. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.pcsao.org/factbook>

<sup>3</sup> Peters, D. J. (2020). Community susceptibility and resiliency to COVID-19 across the rural-urban continuum in the United States. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 36(3), 446–456. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12477>

<sup>4</sup> *Home*. Ohio Domestic Violence Network. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.odvn.org/>

addition to financial support, implementing kinship caregiver-centered programming would further prioritize the mental health of kinship caregivers tasked with raising at-risk youth.

### **Why Appalachia?**

Kinship caregiver support is a necessity for many families throughout Ohio. Ohio overdose rates are 85% above the national average,<sup>5</sup> contributing to the more than 100,000 grandparents raising grandchildren in the state.<sup>6</sup> The need for increased kinship caregiver support is especially critical in Appalachian Ohio, a region where the opioid crisis and pandemic-induced economic insecurity has hit the hardest. After all, nearly half of incarcerated parents of children who faced adverse childhood experiences, or ACES, abused substances.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, seven out of 10 counties with the highest drug overdose death rates in the state are located in Appalachian Ohio,<sup>8</sup> and the 11 counties with the highest poverty rates are all located within the region, as well.<sup>6</sup> While rural Ohio continues to struggle with the opioid epidemic in addition to the delayed economic revival associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little policy attention to associated inequities in kinship care.

### **Current Initiatives**

- **The Family First Kinship and Support Act of 2019 and The Family First Prevention Services Act**
  - Ohio public children’s services agencies emphasize placing children who must be removed from their parents’ care with extended family caregivers whenever possible. This aligns with best practice child welfare: children placed in kinship care experience better outcomes on average than their fostered counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The Family First Kinship and Support Act of 2019 and the Family First Prevention Services Act helped solidify family reunification as a statewide priority. The approach has led to a projected 9% of Ohio children raised by kinship caregivers, with many of them being grandparents.<sup>9</sup>
- **Kinship Permanency Incentive Program**
  - Ohio has made efforts to similarly shed light on the needs of kinship caregivers through programs such as the Kinship Permanency Incentive Program (KPIP), through which kinship families are provided the opportunity to stabilize within the first three to five years of receiving custody of a child.<sup>2</sup> However, the resource has gone widely underutilized, and the financial assistance, which is approximately half of what licensed foster parents receive, is not nearly enough for kinship caregivers to meet the complex needs of the children for which they are providing care, especially when the kinship caregivers are grandparents

---

<sup>5</sup> *Drug overdose death statistics: Opioids, fentanyl & more.* NCDAS. (2022). Retrieved from <https://drugabusestatistics.org/drug-overdose-deaths/#ohio>

<sup>6</sup> *2020 Data & Issue Brief.* Children’s Defense Fund Ohio. (2020). Retrieved from [https://staging.cdfohio.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/07/CDF\\_APPALACHIAN\\_REPORT\\_2020\\_vFIN\\_WEB\\_PAGES-1.pdf](https://staging.cdfohio.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/07/CDF_APPALACHIAN_REPORT_2020_vFIN_WEB_PAGES-1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Turney, K. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 89*, 218–225. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.033>

<sup>8</sup> *Explore health rankings: 2021 measures.* County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/measures-data-sources/2021-measures>

<sup>9</sup> *Fact sheet: Kinship care.* Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (2019). Retrieved from <https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/KinshipCare.pdf>

without the ability to return to the workforce.<sup>10</sup> Considering an estimated one-third of kinship families live at or below the federal poverty line,<sup>11</sup> it is evident that more robust solutions are required to bolster these at-risk families' outcomes.

- **Kinship Support Program**

- Similar to KPIP, the Kinship Support Program, or KSP, provides an avenue for kinship families to receive financial assistance for raising their children. Specifically, it assists families in adjusting financially to kinship care roles. This assistance is typically distributed at \$10.50 a day per child under care. These payments last for the first six months of care.<sup>12</sup>

- **Ohio Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office**

- In February 2022, the Ohio Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office was launched to advocate for children and families involved in the child welfare system.<sup>13</sup> Their work heavily focuses on families involved in the foster care and adoption process, as well. This emphasis makes them an essential resource for families navigating complex systems.

- **State Budget FY21-22**

- Governor DeWine's biennial budget FY21-22 included major investments in schools and behavioral healthcare while utilizing a whole child framework.<sup>6</sup> While these investments are positive steps toward building a better future for Ohio children, kinship families must be prioritized for the state's most vulnerable youth to have the opportunity to succeed.

### **Policy and Program Recommendations**

Greater responsiveness to the needs and challenges of grandparent caregivers would be achieved through the following:

- **Adjust the Kinship Support Program assistance scale to match that of licensed foster care providers.**

- Increasing the state's allocation of funds to the KSP can contribute to decreasing the expenses of Ohio's multisystem youth. Rather than contributing to WIC, SSI, SNAP, TANF cash assistance, subsidized childcare costs, or even legal fees or law enforcement dollars, more KSP funding would offer a streamlined assistance resource to kinship caregivers facing financial challenges. Specifically, increasing the amount of the payments, which are currently about half as much as those

---

<sup>10</sup> Petrik, W. (2021). *Budget bite: Security for children & kinship families*. Policy Matters Ohio. Retrieved from <https://www.policymattersohio.org/research-policy/quality-ohio/revenue-budget/budget-policy/budget-bite-security-for-children-kinship-families#:~:text=When%20children%20are%20separated%20from,friends%2C%20known%20as%20kinship%20caregivers.>

<sup>11</sup> Xu, Y., Bright, C. L., Ahn, H., Huang, H., & Shaw, T. (2020). A new kinship typology and factors associated with receiving financial assistance in Kinship Care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 110*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chldvouth.2020.104822>

<sup>12</sup> *Kinship Support Program (KSP) frequently asked questions*. Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (2021). Retrieved from <https://ifs.ohio.gov/ocf/KinshipSupportProgramFAQ.stm>

<sup>13</sup> Ohio Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office. (n.d.). <https://youthandfamilyombudsmen.ohio.gov/>

received by licensed foster care providers, will enhance equity and outcomes among children receiving kinship care.

- **Adjust the Kinship Permanency Incentive Program assistance scale to match that of licensed foster care providers.**
  - The Kinship Permanency Incentive Program (KPIP) offers families eight payments over the course of four years.<sup>8</sup> However, this assistance is not enough for youth with complex needs, and the KPIP program has illustrated limited accessibility. Just over 7,000 Ohio children are impacted by the KPIP, a fraction compared to the 124,000 children living with kinship caregivers and the majority of those youth living with their grandparents.<sup>1,2</sup> In order to be eligible for the KPIP, a family must make less than 300% of the federal poverty line. Mandating child protective services caseworkers and CASA volunteers to provide KPIP resources and assist with KPIP applications while creating more equitable funding for the program would be a large step in increasing access to support.
- **Increase Ohio Works First funding.**
  - Ohio Works First is the financial assistance program affiliated with the state's TANF program. Under OWF, minors can qualify for child-only assistance with no time limit while living with guardians other than their parents. Qualifying for child-only assistance does not require kinship caregivers to achieve formal custody, further increasing access to support. Child-only assistance cases make up about 83% of the OWF caseload,<sup>13</sup> and monthly OWF payments averaged \$221 in November 2021.<sup>14</sup> As of 2020, the state had \$583 million in unutilized TANF funding;<sup>15</sup> a number that has since climbed to over \$650 million. Increasing OWF payments via available TANF funding is a solution that can make up for the lack of equitable funding in resources such as KPIP or KSP.
- **Train child welfare caseworkers to connect clients with programs such as OhioKAN to assist with the kinship care system and familiarize themselves with ODJFS resources beyond the kinship care system.**
  - Kinship caregivers often encounter greater financial struggles than those they encountered when raising their own children in prior years. For example, unexpectedly thrust into caregiving roles once again, grandparents are often forced to rely on little more than retirement savings and social security to make ends meet. Additionally, rural kinship caregivers often do not feel supported by social services and do not know how to access these programs even if eligible.<sup>16</sup> Caseworkers must prioritize educating kinship caregivers on how to apply for financial assistance such as Medicaid, SNAP, and KPIP whenever eligible. Without a clear, streamlined system of support, access to these resources could

---

<sup>13</sup> Hudacek, S. (2021). *Ohio's cash assistance program fails to meet ongoing need*. The Center for Community Solutions. Retrieved from <https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/ohios-cash-assistance-program-fails-meet-ongoing-need/>

<sup>14</sup> *Ohio Works First*. Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (2022). Retrieved from <https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/owf.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *TANF Spending Ohio*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2022). Retrieved from [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tanf\\_spending\\_oh.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tanf_spending_oh.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Landry-Meyer, L., Gerard, J. M., & Guzell, J. R. (2005). Caregiver stress among grandparents raising grandchildren: The functional role of social support. *Marriage & Family Review*, 37(1-2), 171–190. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v37n01\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v37n01_11)

mean the difference between kinship caregivers' children receiving basic necessities or not. Support for enhanced continuing education (CEU) training for caseworkers related to such programs would be of value in terms of strengthening access to such information among kinship caregivers.

- **Expand the definition of kinship care at the state level to foster consistency in program eligibility.**
  - There is inconsistency at the state level regarding what a kinship caregiver is and which kinship caregivers can receive access to services such as KPIP, KSP, and the Kinship Caregiver Program. For example, the majority of these programs' eligibility requirements are reliant on the combination of the child's involvement in the child welfare system and family income. Meanwhile, kinship families without involvement in the child welfare system are especially at-risk because they miss out on avenues of support. In order to ensure greater family coverage, the state should expand its definition of kinship care to provide assistance no matter who is caring for the child, similar to the Ohio Works First child-only assistance program. Specifically, Ohio's Office of Family Assistance can accomplish this through adopting the definition of a kinship caregiver defined in Section 5101.85 of the Ohio Revised Code. By utilizing this broader definition of kinship care, more families can be covered by needed services to help their children thrive.
- **Continue to emphasize the strengths of kinship care by prioritizing kinship care as best practice child welfare.**
  - Family reunification is the ultimate goal of Ohio's child welfare system. Even when it is not an option to reunite parents with children, keeping children within the greater family unit whenever possible produces better outcomes in comparison to entering the foster care system. Children feel more supported, experience higher self-esteem, remain culturally connected, and enjoy a more stable environment.<sup>17</sup> Through solidifying the importance of keeping children within their families, these children are more likely than foster children to achieve greater outcomes and fulfill their potential.
- **Build rapport with kinship caregivers to reduce services stigma.**
  - Many kinship families struggle to qualify for financial assistance or other supports because they are informal in status. Similar to many other rural regions, in Appalachian Ohio, fear of the child welfare system is common, and through offering services putting the kinship caregiver first, such as kinship caregiver support groups, the state can earn the trust of Appalachian Ohioans. Implementing kinship caregiver-centered programming in addition to family-centered support can help break the stigma of receiving public assistance.

---

<sup>17</sup> Houshyar, S. (2020). *A critical resource at risk: Supporting kinship care during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond*. Center for the Study of Social Policy. Retrieved from <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/RelCaregivers/Policy-Kinship-Care-CSSP.pdf>

## Program Examples

The **Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program** (OhioKAN) operates as the state's primary hub in addressing issues surrounding kinship caregivers. Associated with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, OhioKAN provides kinship caregivers with resources that help limit the financial burden of kinship childcare that the state legislature has failed to provide. OhioKAN's Region 4, Region 8, and Region 10 branches specifically connect with Appalachian kinship caregivers. Their model of assisting kinship caregivers through complicated systems is essential in providing caregivers with the resources needed to raise healthy youth. Recently, they have begun to assist in funding kinship caregiver support groups across the state, as well. To find more information on OhioKAN's services, please visit <https://ohiokan.jfs.ohio.gov/>.

Similarly, the **Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition** is an organization that focuses on providing kinship caregivers with resources needed to raise healthy children. The support groups and other caregiver-centered programming offered through the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition is essential in prioritizing kinship caregivers' mental health as they cope with suddenly changing roles. Likewise, the coalition assists kinship caregivers in applying for financial assistance such as the Kinship Support Program, Child Care Tax Credit, and SNAP. The coalition also promotes advocacy for issues regarding kinship care through offering information and resources surrounding policy issues such as kinship care financial assistance. To learn more about the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition, please visit <https://ohiograndparentkinship.org/>.

The **Kinship Caregivers Connect Support Group** complements OhioKAN and the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition's services by providing programming centered on the socioemotional well-being of kinship caregivers. In addition to a weekly online support group, the Kinship Caregivers Connect Support Group also provides resources on how to navigate schools and legal systems, self-care tips, and mental health. For more information, visit <https://kinshipcaregiversconnect.com/>

Finally, **Ohio START** utilizes a family-centered approach to ensure that families grow together. Launched under the DeWine administration, Ohio START assists clients struggling from substance use disorders by treating addiction from a whole family, strengths-based perspective. Upon entering the program, families are placed with a caseworker and peer mentor tasked with connecting resources and supports necessary to develop family cohesion. This program encourages each client to take strides from struggling addict to fully functioning, contributing family member. Stronger efforts to reunify families impacted by substance abuse would reduce the likelihood that children are taken out of families' care and into the kinship or foster care systems for extended periods of time. For more details on Ohio START, visit <https://ohiostart.org/>.

## **Conclusion**

Families do not expect to raise children that are not their own. However, over 100,000 Ohio grandparents and many more families admirably stepped up when family crisis struck for 228,000 children. Unfortunately, kinship caregivers' love and support are not enough to raise their children. Kinship caregivers are not supported by the state similarly to foster parents, an inequity that detrimentally impacts kinship families already experiencing socioeconomic hardships across Ohio and especially in rural Appalachia. A one-stop, streamlined path to assistance is needed to maximize access, decrease costs, and enhance the services received by kinship caregivers. Additionally, greater mental health support is a necessity for strained caregivers.

Tens of thousands of Ohio's children live in kinship care today. By investing in kinship caregivers, Ohio will invest in its future. Creating an efficient, sustainable assistance solution for kinship caregivers aligns with Ohio's priorities while fostering the growth of Ohio's most vulnerable children, as well.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Appalachian Children Coalition would like to thank OhioKAN, the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Care Coalition, and the OHIO Alliance for Population Health for their contributions to the making of this brief. Also, a special thank you to the kinship caregivers who offered their time, insights, and perspectives. Your voices are instrumental and greatly appreciated.