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Over 100,000 Ohio grandparents are raising their grandchildren.¹ Love and nurturing from caring family members are critical but not sufficient to support Ohio's most at-risk youth population. Caregivers also require support to meet their obligations to the children in their care. Kinship caregivers are only provided about half of the financial assistance that is provided to licensed foster parents.² This inequity detrimentally impacts grandparents raising grandchildren and other kinship families already experiencing economic hardships across Ohio and especially in rural Appalachia. Additionally, kinship families do not have access to information and other supports that may be available to licensed foster parents. A one-stop, streamlined path to assistance and strong supportive programming are needed to maximize access, decrease costs, and enhance the services received by kinship caregivers.

A number of kinship care initiatives have been undertaken in Ohio. These are described below. For an introductory background on kinship care in Appalachian Ohio, please visit <https://www.appchildren.org/resources> to find *Kinship Care in Appalachian Ohio*, a policy brief discussing region-specific challenges and statistics.

Current State of Ohio 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.³ The [Family First Transition Act](#) and the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) helped solidify family reunification as a statewide priority. The approach has helped lead to a projected 9% of Ohio children raised by kinship caregivers, with many of them being grandparents.⁴
- **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 \(KPIP\)](#),

¹ 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

² 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.>

³ 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>

⁴ Fact sheet: Kinship care. Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (2019). Retrieved from <https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/KinshipCare.pdf>

through which kinship families are provided the opportunity to achieve greater financial stability within the first three to five years of receiving custody of a child. However, the resource has been widely underutilized, as only 7,000 out of about 238,000 Ohio children living with kinship caregivers are impacted by the program.^{5,6} The financial assistance provided by KPIP, 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.² This is especially true when the kinship caregivers are grandparents without the ability to return to the workforce. Considering an estimated one-third of kinship families live at or below the federal poverty line, it is evident that more robust solutions are required to bolster these at-risk families' outcomes.⁷

- **Kinship Support Program**

- Like 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 \$11.74 a day per child under care. These payments last for the first six months of care. In comparison, non-kin foster parent payments vary by county, but range between a minimum of \$12.00-\$54.33 a day per child depending on the child's age range, with the average minimum rate hovering around \$25.00-\$30.00.⁸

- **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. Their work heavily focuses on families involved in the foster care and adoption process, as well. Specifically, they work to investigate complaints sent directly from youth in the children services system. The office then uses these cases to recommend changes to improve child welfare policies. This emphasis makes them an essential resource for families navigating complex systems.

- **Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (Ohio KAN)**

- The [Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program \(OhioKAN\)](#) operates as the state's hub in connecting kinship caregivers with resources. 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. 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 provides caregivers with the resources needed to raise healthy youth. Although OhioKAN's data and resource hub are currently internal as the program completes its pilot stages, they aim to make the information more public facing in 2024.

⁵ 2019 PCSAO Factbook. Public Children Services Association of Ohio. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.pcsao.org/factbook>

⁶ Grandfacts: State fact sheets for grandfamilies. Grandfamilies.org. (2021). <https://www.grandfamilies.org/>

⁷ 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.childyouth.2020.104822>

⁸ Policy Matters Ohio. (2021). *Foster Care Maintenance Rates (SFY 2020)*. Support Ohio Children by Funding Kinship Care. <https://www.policymattersohio.org/files/assets/kinshipcareappendicec.pdf>

- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Implementation**
 - Child-only TANF, or [child-only Ohio Works First](#), is often the primary source of support for Ohio’s kinship caregivers, and specifically for the state’s informal kinship caregivers. The average monthly payment in November 2021 per child was \$221. For kinship caregivers who are grandparents living on a fixed income and unable to return to the workforce, this support is not sufficient to make a dent in the needs of raising a child. Meanwhile, Ohio has accumulated over [\\$619 million in unspent TANF](#) block grant funding as of 2021. Today, the number sits around [\\$680 million](#). In other words, about [85%](#) of federal funding allocated to supporting low-income families is sitting unused while kinship care families struggle to make ends meet. Through raising child-only Ohio Works First payments, kinship caregivers would receive a significant boost in assistance that would improve their children's outcomes.

Current Nonprofit Initiatives

A number of Ohio nonprofit organizations have worked to fill gaps in support for kinship caregivers. Listed below are organizations supporting and advocating for Ohio’s most vulnerable families.

- **Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition**
 - The [Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition](#) is an organization that focuses on providing kinship caregivers with resources that support raising healthy children. The monthly support group and other caregiver-centered programming offered through the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition are 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 the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (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.
- **Kinship Caregivers Connect**
 - [Kinship Caregivers Connect](#) complements the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition’s and OhioKAN’s services by providing programming centered on the socioemotional well-being of kinship caregivers. In addition to a weekly online support group, Kinship Caregivers Connect also provides resources on how to navigate schools and legal systems, self-care tips, and mental health.
- **Southeastern Ohio Legal Services**
 - [Southeastern Ohio Legal Services](#) is a nonprofit, civil legal aid organization with offices located throughout Appalachian Ohio. It provides families with legal support on common issues such as navigating individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with special needs, additional information about guardian rights in special education, and extensive resource guides for other kinship family issues such as visitation and custody rights, financial assistance options, medical services, and legal support.

Policy and Program Solutions – Examples from Other States

While Ohio has made steps toward better equipping its kinship families, other states have taken different approaches. Below are several programming and policy solutions implemented by other states that reflect best practice for working with kinship care families and their children.

Child Welfare Policy

- **Kinship Care Firewall**
 - New York, Tennessee, Connecticut, and Oklahoma currently use a kinship care firewall policy to ensure that kin are not passed over when connecting a child with a child welfare placement. A kinship care firewall ensures that kin placements are the default option for child welfare agencies, as non-kin placements must be approved by an agency supervisor. Ohio's Family First Prevention Services Act encourages kinship caregiver placements as best welfare practice, but the implementation of a kinship care firewall policy would boost the state's assurance that the process is being implemented to the greatest degree. Please visit [this link](#) for Ohio Supreme court information on the policy or [this link](#) for a statement from a coalition of New York child advocacy organizations on the policy.
- **Blind Removal**
 - [Blind removal](#) is a process identified to reduce the gap between children of color being disproportionately removed from their homes and placed into child welfare. For example, in a pilot project undertaken in Nassau County, New York, teams of child welfare workers, supervisors, and attorneys meet to discuss cases and determine if child removal is necessary. The key facts of each case are presented, but the client's demographic factors are removed from the case. This design is meant to reduce the implicit biases in deciding whether to remove a child from the home or not. This practice could reduce the number of children in kinship care placements or those who enter the child welfare system.
- **Streamlined Paths to Foster Parent Licensure**
 - One major barrier to kinship caregivers receiving needed support is their lower access to systems in place, such as the foster care licensure process. Foster care licensure opens access to additional financial support and other resources. However, the cultural stigma of child welfare services involvement and lack of experience with human services agencies and/or applying for benefits often limits kinship caregivers' abilities to enhance the services they provide for their families. However, the State of Washington recently launched a pilot program, called the [Caregiver Engagement Unit](#), to connect kinship caregivers with the foster licensure process as quickly as possible to ensure speedy access to benefits. The program illustrated a decrease in time between kinship child placement and licensure. Ohio's implementation of a similar program, through entities already in place such as Ohio KAN, would decrease the time that kinship caregivers go without equitable benefits to help support their families.

- **Separate Licensing or Approval Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes**

- A recent federal rule change allows any Title IV-E child welfare agencies to [provide kinship caregivers with a kin-specific foster care licensure option](#). The standards to be licensed for kin-specific licensure would be rooted in safety regulations, reducing the other requirements for kinship caregivers to be approved for foster care licensure. This policy change provides a new opportunity to provide kinship caregivers with equitable support in comparison to licensed foster caregivers. However, the federal rule is considered an option for agencies and not a requirement. To be enacted, the rule must be implemented at the state level.

Cash Assistance

- **Kinship Caregiver Parity**

- Ohio currently offers limited resources to kinship caregivers who are unlicensed as foster parents, with the main source of support being child-only Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in addition to supports that are often challenging to access, such as KPIP and KSP. Meanwhile, minimal resources are available for informal kinship caregivers. However, states such as Maine are leading the charge for kinship caregiver parity in comparison to licensed foster caregivers. In [Maine](#), kinship caregivers who are unlicensed as foster caregivers are granted a lower level of licensed foster parent reimbursement, which is a significant step forward in comparison to other states. Upon licensure, kinship caregivers are eligible for additional reimbursement rates. Other states such as Arizona, Michigan, Nebraska, and Washington offer financial assistance parity for kinship caregivers unlicensed as foster parents.

- **STABLE Accounts**

- [STABLE](#) is an innovative program initiated in multiple states to provide individuals with developmental disabilities with the opportunity to save and invest their money while keeping their disability benefit eligibility. Ohio currently has a STABLE program in place for this population, but expanding the program to include children in foster care or kinship care placements as they transition into adulthood could reduce the sharp [benefits cliff](#) in the state.

Support Programming

- **Healthy Grandfamilies**

- West Virginia State University Extension's [Healthy Grandfamilies](#) is a program that connects kinship caregivers with evidence-based programming provided by local leaders. Healthy Grandfamilies is a support group and navigator service that connects caregivers with resources and educational materials needed to help raise their families. Though the program uses a statewide curriculum, it is adaptable at the county level to fit each specific community's specific needs. The program also provides additional socioemotional support by facilitating kinship caregiver connections with individuals facing similar challenges while receiving resources to benefit their families' wellbeing, as well.

- **New York Kinship Care Navigator**

- The [New York State Kinship Navigator](#) is considered by many to be the gold standard for a kinship navigator program. The program offers virtual case management services, legal resources, a public-facing resource map, online educational resources, and kinship policy fact sheets. The purpose of kinship navigators is to be a hub for caregivers to easily find resources, and the New York State Kinship Navigator’s accessibility, public-facing information, and constant production of interactive, educational content sets them apart from the rest of the pack. In Ohio, Ohio KAN’s navigator program is just getting started and wrapping up its pilot study, but its data nor resources are public facing.

What’s Next?

Ohio’s kinship caregivers need more support in raising the state’s most vulnerable youth. One way to foster greater support is through advocating for specific policies in Ohio. Through connecting with legislators and increasing their awareness on the issues faced by kinship caregivers in the state and in the Appalachian region, providers and advocates can better position kinship caregiver families. Similarly, providers should encourage kinship caregivers with lived experience to engage in advocacy activities. Their stories, when combined with macro-level data, create well-rounded insight for legislators previously unaware of kinship care issues.

Finally, enhancing collaboration between pre-existing service providers and resources is another approach to improving kinship care family outcomes. Whether it is referring kinship caregivers to other agencies offering more specific support, linking with an organization such as Kinship Caregivers Connect for more information on virtual support groups, or connecting passionate kinship caregiver advocates with the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship coalition for events such as Kinship Advocacy Day, collaboration is a source of strength that Appalachian Ohio can lean into to optimize kinship caregiver outcomes.

Today, more than 238,000 children across Ohio are living with kinship caregivers.⁶ Appalachian Ohio’s greater concentration of problematic determinants such as poverty and drug overdose rates places kinship families within the region at even greater risk.^{9,10} However, through leveraging existing Appalachian strengths and being flexible to adopt innovative solutions, families can get the resources they need. Revamped outreach to enhance the impact of current programming, increased collaboration among service providers, and advocacy for specific legislation can be combined to help provide Appalachian Ohio kinship caregivers with the support needed to better raise their families and boost their children’s outcomes.



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⁹ The Ohio Office of Research. (2020). *The Ohio Poverty Report*. Ohio Development Services Agencies. https://development.ohio.gov/static/community/redevelopment/The-Ohio_Poverty-Report-June2020.pdf

¹⁰ *Explore health rankings: 2021 measures*. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/measures-data-sources/2021-measures>