



Critical Issues in Foster Care: Kinship Caregivers

Many children and youth in Michigan are being raised by grandparents and other relatives when their own parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. In some situations, this “kinship care” with grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings and other relatives is informally arranged. In other situations, the child welfare or court systems get involved and relatives are given legal status as guardians or licensed as foster parents. There is ample evidence showing that in many circumstances children thrive in the stable environments created through kinship care, which is why child welfare systems have stated priorities that include placing children with suitable relatives when possible. In Michigan, over 4,000 children live with a relative who is a licensed foster parent, and according to Generations United, more than ten times that many children outside the foster care system live with a grandparent or other relative. However, the full picture of Michigan children in informal living arrangements with relatives is not well known.

Why is kinship care so often the best placement for children and youth?

Prior to leaving or being removed from their homes, many maltreated children experience high rates of trauma and have significant mental and physical health needs. The uncertainty that comes with removal itself, including possible separation from siblings, can create additional trauma. Considering this exposure, placement with a supportive relative is often more beneficial to children than placement with a non-relative foster parent. Children living with the support of trusted family members in a familiar and safe environment with familiar routines and family traditions have a greater sense of safety and stability. Additionally, kinship care placement may allow children to stay with their siblings and maintain their cultural identity. Many studies have confirmed that these situations result in better social, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for children and youth separated from their biological parents (Generations United, 2017).

What challenges do informal kinship caregivers face?

Limited access to services. Children removed from their homes have experienced the same types of trauma and have the same needs for trauma-informed mental health and support services, and access to healthcare coverage regardless of who is caring for them. While these desperately-needed services are part of the foster care system, they are not paid for in informal kinship care and without legal status, kinship caregivers may have difficulty enrolling the children in school and providing consent for medical or mental health services.

Financial hardships. Suddenly having to care for a relative’s child can be a significant financial strain on any caregiver, especially those with lower incomes. Children in informal kinship care may qualify for child-only cash assistance through the Family Independence Program (FIP), but the payments are significantly less than the financial assistance given to foster parents and many caregivers aren’t aware of the program, aren’t eligible due to income or asset restrictions, or are denied because forms are completed incorrectly (Generations Unlimited, 2017). According to the Census, in 2016, while nearly one third of grandparents in our state raising grandchildren had incomes below the poverty level, fewer than one in ten of them received any type of cash assistance for the children in their care (Generations United, 2017). Relatives don’t obtain legal guardianship of the children in their care for many reasons, including the lengthy and expensive process. Without legal or financial assistance, obtaining legal guardianship may be unrealistic for anyone on a fixed income.

Added vulnerability of caregivers themselves. Older relatives providing care may be especially vulnerable: many are retired, on a fixed income, and have their own health issues. Many older adults live in senior housing where children are not permitted, or their home may be too small to accommodate the child. The added expense of finding and moving to suitable housing may be especially burdensome. Caregivers may also risk isolation, with caregiving limiting their opportunities to socialize with friends and receiving much-needed respite and emotional support as they learn to parent again with ever-changing technology and new educational practices. Their isolation can lead to loneliness and depression which directly affects the well-being of children in their care.

Why don't relatives just get licensed through the foster care system?

Some kinship caregivers obtain foster care licenses which provide them with financial assistance, health care coverage, case management and other essential support services. However, becoming a licensed foster parent may not be an option for some family caregivers. If the kinship care is informally arranged, the child will not be in the child welfare system and would not be eligible for foster care benefits even if the caregiver obtains a license. Allowing the child and their parents to be connected to the welfare system has risks as well. If the caregiver goes through the process but then does not qualify for a foster care license, the child may be taken away from them and placed elsewhere.

Despite the benefits for children staying with family, there are a variety of reasons that a kinship caregiver could be denied a foster care license; for example, majority of denials for licensure for kinship caregivers are because of non-safety related restrictions. Additionally, licensing can take 2 months or more, during which time children may be required to stay with a non-relative foster parent. Placement in a home with a stranger may retraumatize children who have already endured a significant amount of trauma.

What can be done?

- **Find out more about who is providing kinship care in Michigan and identify their needs.** Conduct a kinship care study that would help identify the number of informal kinship caregivers in Michigan, identify their needs, and help determine the feasibility of expanding foster care benefits to informal kinship caregivers. There was an item in the state budget last year to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of expanding benefits to informal kinship caregivers, but it was removed from the final budget.
- **Review the barriers to kinship caregivers getting foster care licensing.** Develop recommendations to remove barriers to their participation in the formal foster care system when preferred by the provider.
- **Designate trained kinship care specialists in every county.** Navigating the systems needed to provide care for a child can be challenging for a kinship caregiver. A specialized kinship care caseworker could educate kinship caregivers about the services available to them and the steps they need to take to access those services. Kinship navigator programs, like those in place in other states and consistent with Michigan's support for foster care navigators, can assist with navigating the legal system, providing listening support, connecting kin with support groups, and educating the community about the needs of kinship caregivers.

References

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